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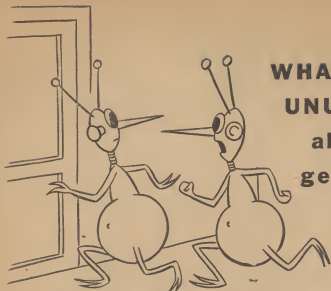
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Editorial

A FEW months ago we asked you to "sit in" with us at an editorial conference and give us the benefit of your views on what ought to be in *Amazing*. Your response was—as is usual with science-fiction fans—generous and overwhelming. It took some time for our mail room to dig itself out from under the flood of replies, and for tabulators to produce the facts and figures.

Now that we have the answers, I'd like to share them with you, for I'm sure you want to know the results, and to see how your personal opinions stack up with the consensus. Let's take it point by point:

1—We asked if you liked a monthly full-length novel, an occasional novel, or mostly more short stories. The vote was a walkover for the regular monthly novel—more than 3 to 1, in fact. Even those fence-sitters who plumped for an occasional novel mustered more strength than the short-story aficionados.

2—Fact articles, or all fiction? This one went right down to the wire and ended in a virtual tie, with many of you backing up your vote with tempestuous comments.

3—A regular "reprint corner" for a classic story, or all-new fiction? Another close race, with "all-new" voters showing surprising strength. This, too, ended in a Mexican standoff.

4—Most of you approved of *Amazing's* new classified ad section; and it was heart-warming to see that nearly all of you voted *all* our regular features—editorials, book reviews, cartoons, and letters—as "interesting."

5—We asked how you'd change *Amazing* if you were the editor, and maybe we should have known better than to leave ourselves this

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THE WORLD BURNERS

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

CALLOWAY would have been a hard man to forget if for nothing more than his looks; a big six-foot-three Irishman, he was lucky to have been born after the space age grew its muscles and a man wasn't barred for being big. Earlier, all spacemen were the midgets of the species what with weight to be considered. Calloway was also one of the homeliest men I ever met, but he was saved in this respect by a pair of the bluest eyes I have ever seen and after a little while you forgot his homeliness—it became an asset in fact; the ugly Irish mug, the deep azure eyes—and the sense of wonder.

That was how the examiners who made up his psych-sheet described it. Calloway rated straight pluses all down the line and because there was no classification slot for what ailed him

To Calloway the rusty freighter was a silver galleon rocketing down the spaceways; the girl was a princess; and the world he went to destroy was a city in a dream.

they merely entered the comment: *This applicant possesses a unique enthusiasm we can best describe as a perpetual sense of wonder. He is happily amazed by practically everything. We do not consider the characteristic as a negative. We regard it as a rarity.*

So they let Calloway through and he became a *Spaceman, Conditional 3rd class* and applied for a berth on the Arcturus Lines at the same time I did. That was where I met him.

We were examined and accepted by the Arcturus medics on the same morning. We left the examining room together and out in the corridor Calloway turned those dreamy eyes on me and said, "We're going to the stars!"

I wasn't sure I heard correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said we're going to the stars."

"Well that was the general idea of applying to Arcturus wasn't it?"

"Of course."

"And let's hope we start pretty quick."

"I'm with you on that. Rocketing down the spaceways in a silver galleon."

"In a what?"

He smiled, the blue eyes filled with a faraway look. "A galleon is a kind of ship men sailed across the seas of Earth in very ancient times."

"Well, I'm afraid you've been misinformed, friend. You're going to ride a rusty old Arcturus freighter and you're not going to any stars in the near future. You're going to haul crates and boxes back and forth among the planets of this system."

He looked at me as though I were an unfeeling clod which indeed I was from his point of view. "My name's Calloway," he said. I told him mine was Raber and we shook hands and went for a drink.

That was how I met him and as time went on, my surprise didn't diminish, it became even more so when he began talking about the ancient writers and poets. We were assigned to the *Galactic*, a creaky old Arcturus carrier with two days to clearance. We took up together, each for want of better company, and at dinner the next night, he asked me, "Did you ever read Zane Grey?"

"Read him? I never even heard of him."

"I suppose that's logical. Ever read the poetry of Robert W. Service or Rudyard Kipling?"

"No. I listen to tapes once in a while. Venusian musicals mostly, and I read the news bulletins. That's about all."

He sighed, "And thy name is legion."

"I don't get you. My name is Raber."

"Never mind. Service and Kipling were ancient poets. Their work is immortal although there isn't much interest in it now; there hasn't been for well over a hundred years—not since people quit reading. A shame. A crying shame. What Keats and Byron and Shakespeare could have done with today's world! Why, with Zane Grey's imagination loosed in modern times, we would have stories the like of which—"

"But that's all in the past—the dead past, today we—"

"Dead? Romance should never die! The wonder of creation should be as necessary a part of a man's makeup as his ability to read an astrochart."

I couldn't see any point in arguing it so I backed away and changed the subject and it wasn't until we boarded ship and were stowing our gear that the subject came up again; when I saw what Calloway had brought with him. Books! Of all the useless stowage imaginable, four books! No doubt of some



She would rather die than be forced to leave her beautiful world.

value as ancient relics, but as out of place on a spacer as milk in a gin bottle.

I asked, "What in the devil are those for?"

"For reading. What else? They're four of my favorites. *The Ballad of Reading Goal*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, and *Cimarron*."

"But there's plenty of taped entertainment aboard. There are even sensitapes—"

"Trash! A waste of time. Raber, if you'd just take the time to read one of these books—get the true thrill of romance—"

I wasn't having any, so I backed away again and changed the subject.

Now don't get the idea that Calloway was an inefficient dreamer or a bad spaceman. Quite the opposite. He was a dynamo and he could outwork and outmorale any man on the ship. Extra hours were his meat, his drive and willingness—I am sure—bound up in the belief that he was a part of progress; of a great living, breathing operation he called the modern age.

Nor was he a shy, retiring nonaggressionist. A sort of militant missionary for romance, on the contrary. I recall the rest period when he decided the idle members of the crew—lucky fellows!—should be initiated into the wonders of Arthur Miller. So he began reading the ancient play—*Death of a Salesman* aloud. Some of the crew listened,

others went to sleep and one tough veteran called Calloway a crazy dirt eater.

Calloway put the book down and drifted over to his insulter. He stayed there for a brief time, and then went back to his book and the veteran listened with respect—minus three teeth, now—but with respect.

I got along well with Calloway, and even mildly enjoyed the chapters he read to me out of Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*, a peculiar tale of anti-social goings on during one of the transitory periods in the history of early America. But the story enthralled Calloway and he no doubt knew it by heart . . .

That was the situation when we came into White Sands after a Martian run and the *Galactic* was pressed into government service under an emergency edict. The crew was pressed also and we were herded into the Post Director's office for a briefing.

You may or may not have heard about the thing. It was classified as vital but not dangerous because it was under control so it didn't get top rating on the news broadcasts. In fact I think it was played down because they didn't want rumors to get started.

A big man from the Space Commission briefed us on our part.

It seemed that a far space station, one of the few equipped with the Critchfield Scanners,

picked up a refracted playback of some events at the far edge of the continuum—out where infinity starts bending into time and space.

A planet out there was in some kind of trouble as evidenced by the fact that the entire population was being lifted off in a fleet of ships.

The fleet, some twenty globes, were already space born when the movement was located and the planet had novaed, evidently a planned annihilation resulting from delayed fission.

Our people had enough evidence—I don't know exactly what it was—to convince them it was a nonhostile move and the fact that the fleet would orbit into our system, completely wrecking us, was a miscalculation rather than an intent.

So an intercepting move became necessary. We had to get out there and cut them off.

The commission brains assumed that the globes were in fixed orbit so the passengers would have to be taken off in order to reorbit the globes on a new weight-mass basis.

Our old *Galactic* was to participate in the operation. They would equip us with a Marquis space-drive unit and if the speed didn't rip the freighter to pieces, we would make it all right.

As we left the briefing, Calloway's eyes were fairly glowing. "Isn't it the most fantastic thing you ever heard of?"

It hadn't struck me that way. "What's so fantastic about it?"

"Why, man! Doesn't it get you? A whole population building a fleet of ten-mile-thick space globes, then embarking into the unknown and blowing up their old world behind them! Don't you get a thrill out of it? Isn't it wonderful?"

"Not particularly. What's so extraordinary about any of it? They're obviously an advanced race, so building the ships would be no great job. It probably took ten or twenty years. And any idiot can fission a planet if he has the equipment."

I had disappointed Calloway. "You're as bad as all the rest," he complained. "The wonders of creation, of the universe we live in, just pass you by. You take miracles for granted."

"There are no miracles. Everything that happens can be scientifically explained."

"Of course, but you miss my point entirely! Romance is the spark—the soul-stuff that turns dull reality into a breath-taking adventure. Don't you—"

"Afraid not, old fellow. What say to a few drinks before we mount our silver sky-stallions and—"

"You're hopeless," Calloway snapped. But we'd become such good friends that he let me keep my teeth. . . .

The next outburst of his wonder complex came a few watches out, when he rushed into our cabin and said, "Have you met the esps?"

"Good Lord, no. Why would I want to meet the esps?"

"Because they're marvelous! Why it staggers the imagination just to think of them. Torch bearers! Specimens of the superman of the future. The mental man. It gives me a thrill just to watch them talking to each other in dead silence; conversing with their minds!"

"But look here, Calloway. If they couldn't talk to each other mentally they wouldn't be a damned bit of use to us. That's what they're for—to get across to strange races and save us from lugging bulky translation machines that might or might not work."

"All right," Calloway flared. "But can you do it? Can you reach into a man's mind and get his thoughts, no matter what language he's thinking in, and translate it into your own tongue?"

"Of course not, but I can clean and recharge a jet tube better than any esp that ever lived."

"You're hopeless!"

"I suppose so. But you'd better use a little of your mental energy hoping the race we're contacting have esps of their own. If we can't understand each other we may be in for a fight."

"There!" Calloway grinned in triumph. "You just contradicted yourself. By saying that, aren't you admitting they are much more important than we are? If it wasn't for their talent at reception all of us might be killed."

"And if it wasn't for my abil-

ity to clean a tube right, we'd be damned sure of being killed—blown all to hell and gone."

"You don't even argue intelligently," Calloway snorted. "You should read some of the ancient debates; Lincoln and Douglas; or some of the immortal speeches by William Jennings Bryan, or Winston Churchill."

"Can't think of anything that could possibly be duller," I said.

"I can't understand why I waste my time trying to light a spark in you," Calloway said as he plunged into his bunk and snatched an ancient copy of Oscar Wilde's atrocious poetry.

That was how it went but while Calloway wasn't able to get his wonder concepts over to anybody else, neither did we dampen in the least his flaming enthusiasms and wide-eyed interpretation of everything around him.

Personally, I secretly admired this dynamic but misdirected enthusiasm for life even though I didn't share it and only once did Calloway really annoy me. This was during an off-watch period when he picked up a primer key from the table and said, "Did you ever stop to consider the tremendous power—the great cosmic law—that holds the electrons and protons in this bar of metal together?"

I said, "Calloway! Stop it! I've had about enough! Next you'll start telling me that just sitting around breathing is surprising and miraculous!"

"Well, as a matter of fact, the processes of life are—"

We had some pretty sharp words, then, and weren't speaking for a couple of watches, but a short time later, we made destination and I stood looking out a port into the star-blaze that reflected on the migrating fleet and I heard a hushed voice at my shoulder.

"Isn't it the most magnificent sight you ever laid eyes on?"

What could you do with a man like Calloway?

In fact this time, he had a point. It was an arresting pattern in geometrical precision; a vast fleet of perfect globes; shining metal balls so clearly magnified by the vacuum of space and the sharp cosmic refraction. As I watched I pitied the traffic engineers as our four-thousand-ship fleet slipped into orbit with the two hundred huge vehicles of the space voyagers. Plotting the pattern of integrated flight and making it work called for fantastic precision. Yet, in the end, it was accomplished with only four minor collisions.

Now that we had made contact, the problem went into the first of its difficult phases. Action assignments were fanned out from our master ship after our radio contact brought only an unintelligible response from the globes. It was the opinion of our experts that our overtures were interpreted as hostile.

It appeared that the voyagers were presenting a non belliger-

ent front as no structure for defensive weapons were apparent on the globe exteriors. So we chanced a survey through use of the powerful Xenar exovis; a comparatively new device for looking through thicknesses of obstructing material—a utilization of the old X-ray method. The result could have been disastrous because, while we could see into the globes without difficulty, some component of the voyager's metal made it vulnerable to the rays and it started to turn molten.

This left only our esps. Calloway and I, as able spacemen, were assigned as escorts to a blond, frail youth who had never before been in space. We got him into a suit, talked down his fright, and practically carried him to our objective—the shell of the lead ship.

Successful contact proved that the voyagers had esps of their own who were on the job.

We were tuned in on the esp's wave as he reported back to the ship and I sensed Calloway's thrill as we stood there magnetized to the metal shell listening to the exchange. Headquarters sent the words to be translated into thought and the esp sent back the voyager's replies verbally.

"We are not hostile. We are not hostile."

"They say welcome. Why have we intercepted them?"

"We saw your planet fission. We assume you are searching for a new location."

"Not searching. They are orbiting to a habitable system they have located. I am unable to translate the location."

"You have made a miscalculation. You are orbiting through our system and two others. You will destroy them and yourselves. You did not plot an open orbit."

"They say that is impossible."

"Is your course preorbited?"

"They say yes, but error is impossible."

"Recheck. There must have been variables in your computations. We suggest you let us reevaluate for you in the light of more current knowledge."

"They say they will recheck. If revaluation is necessary in their opinion, they will make the request."

We left it at that and returned to our ship and weren't in on any more such exchanges. But after a while word got around that the voyagers asked for the reveal and acknowledged their error, thus opening the second phase of the operation—transfer of the population from the doomed globes.

Calloway and I, now functioning as a unit, were assigned to escorting our top men to the globe we had contacted, this one proving to be the lead ship of the group.

The overall operation was a formidable one and a great deal of primary planning was necessary. We spent twenty watches in the globe, doubling in several

capacities, mainly occupied with helping to take census.

The governmental form was monarchical, but with almost none of the pomp and prestige of kingships as Earth has known them. I learned this from Calloway, who was well up on such phases of ancient history, so I took his word for it.

I only know that the king of the World Burners, as Calloway romantically insisted upon calling them, was a completely ordinary fellow who stood out in that he did all the talking, gave all the orders, and was implicitly obeyed. No one bowed to him, they only asked for orders.

Calloway went into ecstasies over the globe's interior. In fact I was impressed myself. Living well was a part of this race's heritage from far back. The inner construction of the globe was a materialization of pure genius. In a ten-mile diameter, they achieved a flat, staple, circular city, artificially illuminated and bathed in a completely adequate atmosphere. And the overall word for it was *beautiful*. Parks, gardens, ample water, and even a controlled rainfall that kept everything fresh and green.

The whole system, based on fission power, was self-perpetuating, according to the information relayed to us through our esp. Perhaps we could have learned the language—a sort of birdlike warble, but our glottal equipment was not geared to speaking it intelligibly.

Calloway did come to under-

stand a few words at least, but he had a reason in the form of the head man's—the king's—daughter.

To all intents and purposes, she made nothing at all of being a princess. She was gorgeous by Earth standards, but so were all the other females, this being a well-formed race physically—godlike—in Calloway's "sense of wonder" terms. In fact, Calloway didn't find out who she really was until he had persuaded her to walk with him in the gardens a couple of times.

She was a fiery female, a member of the minority that did not approve of the transfer and abandonment of the globes as decreed by the head man. Calloway told me this, admiring her for her spirit and independence.

They were together a great deal of the time, some of which Calloway should have been using for his duties.

Transferring the entire population of the two hundred globes was a monstrous operation, probably the single biggest project ever attempted in space.

It was the head man's basic insistence that all the population—right down to the last individual, be removed from the globes. This could seem like overemphasizing a natural result, but such was not the case when you consider the total area involved in two hundred ten-mile-wide cities and add to that the fact that some of the population didn't want to be moved in the first place. Open rebellion was out of

the question, but the race was not so highly evolved as to exclude possible individual efforts to avoid the dragnet.

So the operation was a little like emptying a sugar sack—but emptying it completely, so that not one, single grain of sugar was left in the sack. And the operation was just about that difficult.

At times, even without a knowledge of the language, I detected an atmosphere of various, small-group resistances, even among those of the population who openly accepted the inevitable move.

And I think this was detected also, in the higher echelon, because the transfer operation was correspondingly fine-meshed.

This meant work, work, and more work, and at times I envied Calloway his eternal romantic outlook on things in that it gave a buoyancy to his movements and an enthusiasm that was contagious.

But I still shrank from his missionary work in this direction.

"Raber," he would say, "you're going to remember this operation. You're going to tell your grandchildren, one day, about the World Burners and how you helped move them out of their globes and saved our own world from destruction."

"You're wrong. When I get through with this back-breaking slavery all I'll want to do is forget it."

"That's what you think now. But wait 'til you find yourself a hero. Then you'll play the part. It's fun being a hero, Raber."

Maybe he was right but I was going to have to get a different perspective to see it. Right now it was double watches, general frustration, and hard work.

"Still, the work got done. The population transfers were put on a schedule of two globes at a time. While census and preparatory routine went on ahead, the globes—by pairs—were emptied into prearranged locations in our own fleet. Then the mop-up squads went over the vacated globes practically inch by inch after which they were locked and carefully nudged out of the fixed orbit to swing away into space on a new trajectory and drift on forever.

Each time a pair of globes were thus stripped and dispatched, Calloway would hold up a hand in salute and say, "Farewell, brave traveler. Good luck on your trip into the eternal," or something equally sticky and sentimental.

His princess ate it up, though. They were together every permissible minute and a great many that weren't permissible. I covered for Calloway quite a few times, but I didn't particularly mind. In fact I preferred it that way because, while Calloway was no doubt able to impart some of his drive and verve, he was like strong seasoning on food—you didn't want too much of him.

The project went very well. Globe after globe was emptied and shunted off until the voyager fleet was reduced to a quarter of its original size.

The navigators were of course watching the time-lapse, computing the overall drift with an eye to correct reorbiting when the project was finished. It was an exacting process.

This last operation was not as simple as it appeared what with the size of the fleet. Moving two thousand ships through space without collisional danger is ticklish business.

The average dirt-eater, looking up at the heavens, judges space to be a vast emptiness sparsely decorated with star points light years apart.

This is not exactly the situation. From where the astrogator sits space is crowded; packed with lethal lumps of matter, each of which is moving on a course of its own—theoretically fixed and predictable of course, but practically as unjudgable as a cloud of gnats pulsing about on a warm summer Earth night.

Thus the astrogator must take the best orbit he can find and in our situation the end of the project had to conform to their findings rather than astrogation awaiting a signal from the project execs.

The astrogators plotted a line-cycle based on the progress of the first three-quarters of the work, fixed their projected orbit, and told the execs at exactly

what moment the fleet must move into its homeward arc.

And they didn't leave much leeway; they couldn't with the entire operation drifting dangerously close to a gypsy star-swarm.

So the tempo was increased by lengthening the watches and accelerating movement wherever possible.

This speeded things up, but frayed nerves and less-smooth handling set up irritation patterns between our people and the voyagers. Resistance groups were directed and pushed instead of being persuaded and led and there were times when only the head man's unquestioned authority prevented actual violence.

Calloway definitely in love with his princess, was swayed by her hostility to our people and openly critical of our methods.

"Raber," he told me, "we've got no moral right to push them around this way. It's become practically a kidnapping operation."

"That's ridiculous and I'm surprised at your taking such a childish view. You know the facts. We've got to get done with it and out of here or the whole fleet will keep rendezvous with a wild cluster on the way home."

"That's not true. They're just out for a record. They could complete the operation and drift until a new orbit was plotted."

"You know better than that, Calloway. It would be too dangerous."

"Well, it may be too danger-

ous not to. There's new resistance among them and she swears she won't go—that she'll find a way to evade the final search."

He was referring, by *she*, to the princess. He always spoke of her as *she*, giving the word a special connotation and individuality by inflection and by actual reverence in his tone.

"No one will evade the final search of any globe," I said. "The combing is foolproof and the head man is with us all the way. You're talking like a child. You've got to face reality."

But Calloway's nature was such that he could not follow that sort of tack for long. His natural effervescence always bubbled up to smother petty things and saturate him with a personal joy at the wonder of things.

And so we came, finally, down to the last pair of globes with the chronometer crowding us, brushing away the last precious hours and pushing us relentlessly toward the irrevocable finish of Operation transfer.

The globes were cleared and the population checked into our ships by the electronic calculators against the master patterns of the original census total. Then the computation was evaluated and six units were missing.

Calloway and I, members of the final cleanup squad, waited with the others for identification of the absentees. It came through and Calloway grabbed

my shoulder, his nails digging in.

"She's one of them."

"So she is. Let's go find her."

This being the last ship, three squads were dispatched for the cleanup. It took seven hours and the sonic-radar units we carried—tuned to the human heart-beat—ferreted out five of the reluctant in widely scattered points of the empty city.

Five. But not six. And when we got these reluctant to the exit ports for identification check, Calloway grabbed my shoulder again.

"It's her! She's the one that's missing."

He was right. It seemed obvious that in some miraculous manner, the girl had evaded sonic-radar equipment that was considered to be infallible. It seemed impossible, yet the girl was missing.

But oddly, I thought, Calloway's reaction was one of elation, admiration, rather than distress. His blue eyes glowed and while the squads waited for orders from the control center, he drew me aside.

"Do you remember the climax of *Riders of the Purple Sage*?"

Even from Calloway, this digression rocked me. I said, "Good Lord, man! Your girl is missing with minute zero coming up and all you can think of is ancient literature."

"That's what makes me remember it. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, the hero and the heroine are running from the vil-

lains. They enter a closed canyon through a narrow pass. The hero can stop the villains by pushing a big stone down that will destroy the pass and seal the canyon."

"Calloway! In the name of all sanity—"

"Let me finish, Raber. Rolling the stone will stop the villains, but it would seal the hero and the heroine in the canyon for the rest of their lives. They would never be able to get out. The hero hesitates to inflict this imprisonment on the heroine. He isn't even sure that she loves him. So he tells her how things are and she answers, 'Roll the stone, Lassiter. Roll the stone.' So he does and they are sealed in the canyon—just the two of them—forever."

"Touching, but I fail to see how such fiction—"

"Romance, Raber! Pure romance. Think of it. The two lovers isolated—"

The orders came through at that moment and I pressed forward to hear the verdict. It was: *End search. Time has run out. Seal globe and return with the five. Use all possible haste.*

There was a scramble after that. We sealed the globe and while we kited back to the fleet a jet rammer was attached to the side of the globe and ignited. It would push the globe out into a harmless orbit and then burn out.

You've no doubt guessed it—a final checkup showed Calloway to

be missing. In the rush and bustle of the final exit, he slipped away—back into the city to find his princess.

The implication of his words there in the globe should have dawned on me, but then, I'm not romantic.

It's rather nice, though, to imagine Calloway living at last, a construction out of his dreams; walking hand in hand with his princess among the fountains, in the gardens, and along the broad avenues of a fairy city all their own; living out an idealistic love found only in story books.

Yes, it is nice to imagine this

but it is not true. Calloway walks his dream city all alone because his princess was located a few hours after we went into orbit. She had been put on another ship and the information had not been fed into the check calculators so they could only report her as missing.

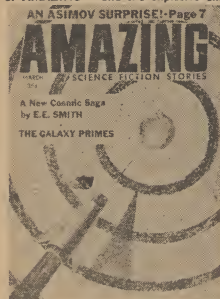
But Calloway didn't know this so he is no doubt still searching for his princess—alone in a world-city from which he can never escape.

Quite a man, Calloway, and as I said in the beginning, I'll always remember him.

THE END

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*Out in the black reaches of interstellar space,
there is an entity. It hates Man. Its weapon is*

THE SILENCE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

I'LL be damned," said Kenneth Worseley, breaking the silence. "I'll be damned." He stared at his watch. "So it is true."

"So is what true?" asked Monica Worseley.

"The odd line of goods that old Mrs. Grant was trying to sell us about silences," replied her husband.

Captain Taylor looked at Worseley and Monica Worseley with some curiosity. He did not speak, however, until he had made the necessary adjustments to his facial aspect, until the what-the-hell-goes-on-here? expression of the conscientious shipmaster confronted with something a little out of the ordinary had been replaced by that of the courteous, urbane host. Taylor knew, as any astronaut of his experience would know, that in the void between the planets

the price of survival is eternal vigilance. He knew that a chance remark made by a passenger—especially one made in tones of genuine astonishment—could well mean that something very seriously wrong had passed unnoticed by watch officers and the monitoring instruments. It was unlikely, but possible.

"That sounds interesting," said Taylor. "Would you mind putting me in the picture?" While he was waiting for Worseley's reply he got to his feet, busied himself with bottles and glasses, saw to it that none of his guests lacked for further refreshment. He thought, as he poured, how lucky he had been to be appointed to this new ship with her constant, comfortable, half-gravity acceleration. Some people liked free fall; Taylor didn't. He would often say that

he had given up drinking out of bottles when he was weaned. The real reason was that he had passed the tests by a fluke and, temperamentally, was unfitted to be a spaceman. He knew this, but did not allow it to worry him. He was a great reader of maritime history and took comfort in the fact that more than one outstanding seaman had suffered from seasickness.

Worseley laughed, his fat, rather sullen face brightened by the momentary animation. He said, "It's nothing, Captain. Nothing of any importance. This Mrs. Grant is a friend of ours back in Brisbane. Her hobby is psychic research. She has a theory about these odd silences that fall, from time to time, on the most animated group conversations. She says that they happen on the hour, at twenty minutes past and at twenty minutes to. This one occurred at nineteen forty hours exactly—nineteen forty, ship's time, which is also nineteen forty, G.M.T."

"It's odd," said Monica Worseley, "but not very important. It was just a coincidence."

"Coincidence be damned!" said Worseley.

Taylor glanced at his other guests. The Sandersons—a rather dull middle-aged couple—were beginning to look interested. The Trevors—he middle-aged, she young—seemed about to take sides. Petersham, the Ship's Surgeon, looked ready to view any possible imbroglio with de-

tached and cynical amusement. He turned his attention back to the Worseleys, was rather shocked by the way in which they were glaring at each other. And yet, he thought, this is the opportunity I've been waiting for. All I have to do is to take charge of the conversation, see that this thing doesn't die a natural death, talk this bunch into getting all the passengers interested. A harmless and pointless piece of psychic research should keep them busy and happy all the way to Port Gregory. And if it does touch off a few private wars, what of it? Feuds among the passengers do much towards alleviating the tedium of a long voyage . . .

"These sudden lulls in the conversation *are* odd," he admitted. "As far as I can remember, I was discussing the ancient Martians with you and Mr. and Mrs. Trevor . . ."

"That is correct, Captain," said Worseley.

"And you, Doc?"

"We were talking about the advantages of constant acceleration over free fall," said Petersham.

"And we all ran out of conversation at once," said Taylor, "and it happened at forty minutes past the hour."

"Coincidence," asserted Monica Worseley again.

"It could have been," admitted Taylor, putting on what his officers called his Supreme Court manner. "Then again, it could not . . . We've a lot of time ahead

of us still. It might well be an idea if we spent some of it on the accumulation of data. I feel sure that the Rhine Institute would be grateful."

"Or the Society for Psychic Research," said Worseley.

"He believes in ghosts," said Monica scornfully.

"And why not?" asked Sander-son.

"Because it's high time that we outgrew all this superstitious rubbish," snapped the girl.

"People still make the mistake of assuming that anything of a paranormal character comes from Outside," said Trevor.

"I've heard of ghosts on Mars," contributed the doctor.

"We're getting away from the silence," said Taylor. "We'll assume that it does descend at regular, twenty-minute intervals. Is it from . . . Outside?"

"I don't think so," said the doctor. "I'm no physicist, but this is the way that I've doped it out. You know how one sound can cancel out another if the two wave patterns are exactly—how shall I put it?—out of step, so that peaks and troughs coincide. During a free-for-all conversation there will be other wave patterns, telepathic ones. Now and again, quite by chance, we have the same canceling-out effect and everybody is at a loss for a word."

Worseley was beginning to look stubborn. "I don't go all the way with the Spiritualists," he said, "but I'm inclined to prefer them to the Rhine Institute boys.

They're as bad as all the other scientists. Whenever anything inexplicable crops up they explain it away so that it will fit their own dogmas."

"He will have his ghosts," said his wife scornfully.

"I could tell you . . ." began Mrs. Sanderson.

"My cousin at the Rhine Institute . . ." Trevor started to say.

"A friend of mine at Port Gregory . . ." started Petersham.

There was a sudden silence.

It was broken, this time, by a deep, booming note that reverberated through the frail, hollow shell of the ship.

"Twenty hundred hours," said Taylor, a note of mild wonderment in his voice. "Twenty hundred hours—and the dinner gong."

"Twenty hundred hours," agreed Worseley. "You know, Captain, I think that we should investigate this thing . . ."

"Do just that," said Taylor. "But I'm afraid that my officers and myself will be able to do no more than take a friendly interest. After all, we have the ship to run."

Which means, he thought, that we aren't taking sides and still the passengers will be occupied.

It was not long before it was suggested that the R.M.R.S. *Delphic* be renamed *Psychic*. Some literal-minded persons pointed out that the name *Delphic* already possessed psychic connotations, but he was shouted down. *Delphic*—for that one voy-

age, at least—became *Psychic*, and that was that.

"You surely started something, sir," said Petersham to Taylor a few ship's days later as they, together with the chief officer, were enjoying a quiet gin in the captain's cabin before lunch.

"Keep the customers occupied and you keep them happy," said Taylor. "We haven't got nine solid months of free fall in these ships, but a two-month voyage is bad enough, long enough for them to get sick and tired of deck games and cards and staring out through the observation ports at sweet damn all. Now they've something to keep them busy, all fifty of them. They're taking notes and swapping theories every waking minute."

"And synchronizing watches every ten seconds," said the mate, "and almost coming to blows as rival schools of thought clash . . ."

"There are some marvelous theories," said Petersham. "And it's a marvelous experiment to determine the limits—if any—of human gullibility and credulity. As I see it, there are three main schools of thought. There are the skeptics, and little Monica Worseley is their leader. They say (a) it doesn't happen and (b) if it does, it's just coincidence. Then there are the Rhinians. The best that they can do is to claim that it's just another of the untapped powers of the human mind. Some people are telepaths, some are teleports but all of us—*they* say—have that

built-in ability to tell the time without any external aid. Like a chiming clock, it is, except that it chimes every twenty minutes instead of every fifteen . . .

"Then there's the third school, the ghost hunters. Mrs. Sander-son's ousted Worseley from the leadership of them. Did you ever hear such piffle? The silences come from Outside, *they* say. Every twenty minutes, regular as clockwork, *something* tries to get in touch with us . . ."

"That's the one that I like," chuckled Taylor. "There are so many implications. Why should this . . . this something from Outside use our somewhat arbitrary method of measuring time? Why shouldn't we have had, say, twenty hours to the day instead of twenty-four, and a hundred minutes to the hour instead of sixty? After all, seeing that we possess ten fingers and ten toes, a twenty-hour day would have been far more logical."

"But that," pointed out the doctor, "is just what *they* say. They contend that if we'd been left to ourselves we should have developed the twenty-hour day. They say that the quite illogical twenty-four hours has been forced on us from Outside."

"Blame the Romans," said the mate. "If they'd been mathematicians—which, of course, they weren't—life would have been far easier for the modern navigator. Twenty-four hours . . . Sixty minutes . . . Sixty seconds . . . Three hundred and sixty degrees to a circle . . ."

"If it hadn't been that," said Petersham philosophically, "it would have been something worse. Man is not a logical animal. He doesn't need external prompting to do something wildly illogical."

"How right you are," agreed Taylor.

The ship's officers were, as Taylor had wished, neutral—but they were interested. There was the fascination that is always exercised by the unknown, the lure of the new frontier. Taylor was interested. He was more of a skeptic than a believer and, furthermore, was obliged to maintain an attitude of strict impartiality—but a little voice at the back of his mind whispered, *There's something there*. Another voice replied, *Perhaps there is, but you'd better leave it severely alone*. Retorted the first voice, *But you aren't afraid of ghosts . . . Or are you?*

He was not, decided Taylor, afraid of ghosts. He did not believe in ghosts. He believed in nothing that could not be weighed and measured.

Even so, he was amused to find that many of his passengers still suffered from the misapprehension that wisdom, as well as authority, is in direct ratio to the amount of gold braid on the sleeve; that his support for the many hypotheses—there were three schools of thought, but each had its heresies—was being sought eagerly.

He was not unflattered when

one night after dinner he was approached by the Worsleys, the Sandersons and the Trevors.

"Captain," said Worsley, "we've accumulated quite a pile of data. We'll be happy if you'll give us your opinion on what we've been able to work out."

"I'm only a layman in these matters," hedged Taylor. "But I shall be interested."

"As a shipmaster, who has to deal with people, you will be," promised Monica Worsley. "The subject of human credulity is almost as fascinating as it is distasteful."

They walked to a corner of the lounge, sat around one of the tables. Worsley left them there, returning after a few minutes with a thick sheaf of papers.

"First of all," he said, "we've established the fact that these odd silences do occur at regular, twenty-minute intervals."

"Also," said Monica coldly, "at nine minutes past the hour, fourteen minutes past, twenty-six minutes past, thirty-eight minutes past and forty-nine minutes past. Those are the results of my own observations over the past three days."

Worsley ignored her. "Since that discussion in your cabin, sir, I've been keeping a careful log of silences. To date this log shows that seventy-three point five of the inexplicable pauses in conversation have occurred at one of the proper times."

"The Rhine Institute will be interested," said Taylor.

"I'm not so sure that I'll pass

the data on to them," said Worseley. "It might be of more use to the Society for Psychic Research."

"How does one lay the ghost of a murdered alarm clock?" murmured Monica.

"Shut up. Those are the figures, Captain, and I think you'll agree that there's a pattern there that's too regular to be accounted for by the laws of randomness."

"Chance doesn't come into it at all," said Trevor. "There are many people who can tell the time quite accurately without watches or clocks. It may well be a talent possessed by all of us. It's obvious what's happened. Since we started the experiment there's been unintentional self-hypnosis on a wide scale. Everybody's subconscious mind is determined that there shall be a silence on the hour and at twenty and forty minutes past. So there is the silence."

"Plausible," admitted Monica Worseley. "Plausible. But it could still be coincidence, and a coincidence not half so far-fetched as some. It's a coincidence in only one dimension."

"What do you mean?" asked Taylor.

"I'll tell you a little story, Captain. Kenneth and I, as you know, are Martians. Not *real* Martians, we weren't born there. New Martians. We emigrated about ten Earth years ago. Anyhow, we returned to Earth for a vacation. We spent some of the time in London. Our very first

day in London we were walking down the Strand and we ran into an old school friend of mine, an Australian, who was also spending a vacation in London but was leaving that same day. So, as you see, all four dimensions were involved — up-and-down, North-South, East-West, and Time. That's really stretching probabilities. These coincidences of Kenneth's involve only Time."

"*Your* coincidence," pointed out Worseley, "was once in ten years — or more — not every twenty minutes."

"According to Rhine . . ." began Trevor.

"It is very patient . . ." Mrs. Sanderson started to say.

"Coincidence . . ." said Monica Worseley.

Then, for long seconds, there was no sound in the lounge but the steady drumming of the rockets.

"Twenty-one twenty hours," murmured Taylor, looking at the big, ornamental clock on the bulkhead.

Taylor was still a skeptic, otherwise he would not have given his permission for the carrying out of the experiment. He knew, too, that the experiment would be carried out whether or not his permission were given and knew that the request for his official approval was no more than an example of passing the buck. Should anything go wrong . . . *But the captain said we could* would be the cry raised by all concerned. Nothing,

thought Taylor, could go wrong. There was nothing to go wrong. He did not disbelieve in ghosts, but had his own theory that these manifestations are no more than some sort of record left on the inner walls of old houses, a record that is played back in the right circumstances or combination of circumstances. It would be possible for an old ship to be so haunted, but *Delphic* was not old. No murders or suicides had ever occurred aboard her, no violent emotions had ever been unleashed within her hull, there were no records of any sort waiting to be played back.

The ghost that Worseley, the Sandersons and their adherents were hunting was a different kind of ghost. The ghost of a murdered alarm clock, Monica Worseley sneeringly called it. The Sandersons didn't call it a ghost at all. They referred to it as a Principle.

"Myra," Sanderson had said seriously, "is psychic. She could have been a professional medium. As it is, at seances in our own home, we have obtained really astounding results . . ."

"And you wish to hold a seance here, aboard this ship?" asked Taylor.

"Not quite a seance, sir," said Worseley. "All we ask is that for the remainder of the evening the lights in this lounge are all extinguished save for one or two dimmed ones, and that all of us here are quiet and relaxed so that when the next silence falls

we shall be ready for it and it, whatever it is, can get through."

"This is the ideal opportunity," enthused Sanderson, his face—bald head, pale eyes behind thick-lensed spectacles, irregular teeth—gleaming. "I've worked out the theory of it. On Earth there are two many distractions. You have a group of people talking together, and the silence falls. But there's always something to jolt them out of it, some noise—the barking of a dog, perhaps, or the screaming passage overhead of an airliner, the noise of the wind . . . Here we have the ultimate silence all around us, and what little noise there is of machinery is so regular as to be almost hypnotic."

"And you expect to be able to persuade everybody here to be as quiet as mice until something unspecified happens—if it ever happens?" queried Taylor.

"I've been thinking it over," said Myra Sanderson. "I think that we should dim the lights, but I don't think that we should ask people to stay quiet. A general conversation, with its interchange of ideas, is, perhaps, necessary. But when the silence falls there should be no—and I mean no—attempt to break it."

"But can you time your trance, darling?" asked Sanderson.

"I shall be open," she replied, "as soon as the silence falls. I shall be open to receive the Principle."

"You can't receive something that is already in your mind," argued Trevor.

"You can't receive something which is non-existent, anyhow," said Monica Worseley.

Myra Sanderson drew about her the almost regal dignity that overly plump, essentially plain women can, at times, assume. She said, "Mr. Trevor, all I ask is that you accord to our little experiment the same degree of co-operation as we would accord to one of yours. Mrs. Worseley, my request to you is that you reserve your sneers until such time as there is a definite disproof of our theory."

"The ghost of a murdered alarm clock," muttered the girl.

"And if you say that again," said her husband, in tones of deepest sincerity, "yours will be joining it."

"Captain," asked Myra Sanderson, "will you explain to your officers and to the other passengers what we are attempting to do?"

"I think you had better do that, Mrs. Sanderson," said Taylor hastily. "After all, it's your experiment. I'm only an interested onlooker."

"As you please, Captain."

Mrs. Sanderson got to her feet. She had a carrying voice. She explained the nature of the experiment, alternately pleaded for and demanded cooperation. Sanderson watched her with an expression that would have been like a spaniel's had his eyes been several shades darker. Worseley hung on her every word, and Monica Worseley watched her

husband's face with ill-concealed dislike. The Trevors registered amused skepticism.

When the speech was over and Mrs. Sanderson had resumed her seat the stewardess came trotting briskly to their table.

"Captain Taylor, shall I dim the lighting?"

"Yes, Pamela."

"Very good, sir."

Taylor saw the surgeon and the chief officer looking pointedly in his direction. He excused himself to the passengers, walked unhurriedly to where they were standing.

"Do you think that this is wise, sir?" asked the mate.

Taylor laughed. "What can happen?"

"I don't believe in any of this rubbish, but there's always the odd chance that there may be *something* . . ."

"Surely, she hasn't got you convinced, Mr. Welsh?"

"She hasn't, but . . ."

"I don't think it's wise either," scowled Petersham.

"You too, Doc? Another skeptic without the courage of your own convictions?"

"I'm a skeptic, sir, and I have the courage of my own convictions. But all this flummery is creating atmosphere." The lights went out with the exception of three dim, red bulbs. "There's a cheap medium's trick for a start. The spirits are allergic to strong lighting, she'll never tell you. The trouble with strong lighting is that it is too liable to reveal trickery. Too, when you have dim

lighting the conditions are so much better for auto-hypnosis . . ."

"But where's the unwisdom?" asked Taylor. "The passengers are keeping themselves amused. They aren't doing any damage to the ship and her fittings in the process. Where's the harm in it?"

"You've let that woman," said the doctor, "set up ideal conditions for mass hallucination, mass hysteria or, even, mass hypnosis."

"There, I don't agree," said Taylor. "If she had insisted that one and all anticipate the next silence by keeping as quiet as possible there'd be some point to your argument. As it is, we're all supposed to be talking our heads off, about anything and everything. Apart from the dim lighting, everything is normal."

"So far," said the mate pessimistically.

"But what can happen, Mr. Welsh? Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Of course not, sir."

"And why not?"

"Well, they just don't. . . ."

Around them the babble of voices suddenly died. Taylor wanted to shout, wanted to make any kind of noise at all to break the deathly hush, but he did not. He remembered Mrs. Sanderson's request for cooperation. He wanted to shout, but he could not. The silence was oppressive, smothering. With a great effort he moved his head, looked away

from the dimly seen faces of his two officers—the mate's mouth was still open, still framing the word that he would never now utter—to the corner where the medium was sitting. It seemed to him that there was a darkness there, a blackness far more intense than it should have been even in this feeble lighting. Worseley, he could see, and Monica Worseley, and the Trevors, and Mr. Sanderson—but of Myra Sanderson there was no sign. She had been wearing a white dress and she was a large woman, and her face was large and pale and her abundant hair was silver. She should have been plainly visible, but she was not. Taylor could see the others, in their dark clothing, quite clearly. She must, he thought, have fallen, must be sprawled beneath the table.

He wanted to call out to Sanderson, to ask him where his wife was. His mouth and lips moved, but no sound came. *I'm deaf*, he thought. But there was still the low, steady thrumming of the rockets, still, at measured intervals, the click of the big bulkhead clock as it ticked away the half minutes. There was the soft soughing of the air circulation system, the throb of a distant pump. There was the faint susurrus of breathing—and, *Will nobody cough?* pleaded Taylor. *Will nobody sneeze?*

The silence and the blackness, he thought—or did he think it? The thoughts were there, and he

was never to know if they came from the recesses of his own mind or from . . . Outside? *The silence and the blackness that were there before the suns and the worlds, that will return when the suns are dead and the worlds sterile, gelid graves of the brawling life that once they supported. The silence and the blackness that have retreated to the void between the worlds but that still, with blind persistence, reach out to the minds of all living things, enforcing brief, temporary cessations of . . . of turbulence? The blackness and the silence, negations of light and life, color and music, the clashing of mind with mind . . . The blackness and the silence, always there, always pressing, and the rhythm of the pressure being the rhythm around which Man, the measurer, has, all unconsciously, built the clocks around which all his science is built . . .*

It's so obvious, thought Taylor—and this time the thoughts were his own. A twenty-digit animal would never divide his day into twenty-four hours of his own accord . . .

The blackness and the silence, cold, implacable, dreadfully patient, yet quick to seize an advantage . . . The blackness and the silence, hating the slim, gleaming ships with their flaring rocket drive, their cargoes of turbulent, boisterous humanity . . .

A numbness was creeping over him and he was aware that the

ship was dying. There was nothing that he could do about it. There was nothing that anybody could do about it. She would die, and her people would die, and she would drive on and out, on and out, to the orbit of Pluto and beyond. The throbbing of the pump abruptly ceased, the whine of the generators deepened and faded. The few dim lights flickered as the change-over to the emergency batteries was made. And when the batteries were exhausted there would be no more light, no more heat, no more circulation of the ship's atmosphere.

But it didn't matter.

Aft, all of a hundred yards beneath his feet, a bemused, less than half-conscious engineer pulled switches and closed valves, actuated the remote controls that would thrust the cadmium dampers into the Pile. The rockets coughed once, gently, briefly, and then the familiar thrumming thunder was gone. Gone, too, was the thrust of the deck against Taylor's feet, the illusory pull of gravity. He was floating in the near darkness, in the void in which the others drifted. There was neither up nor down. There was the knowledge, the definite, morale-shattering knowledge that he was falling to Infinity and that there was nothing, nobody to catch him.

Wildly he clutched at Welsh, digging his fingers cruelly into the Chief Officer's shoulders.

"Welsh!" he screamed, "wake up! Wake up!"

His voice, even in his own ears,

was thin and faint, seemed to be coming from far away.

"Welsh! Wake up!" he screamed again.

The nausea hit him then. He was dimly grateful that there was nobody to see, nobody to watch and gloat over the unedifying spectacle of a spacesick space captain. He longed for the tablets that he always carried with him, that were in the medicine cabinet of his bathroom, that he always took before any maneuvers, such as turnover, involving a few minutes of free fall, the tablets that had been, almost, part of his diet while he was serving in the older, free fall all the way ships. He was the one alive man in the compartment full of zombies—and he was alive only so that he could plumb the ultimate depths of misery.

I am alive, he thought, so that I can save the ship.

Physically, the worst was over, although he was still retching painfully. Mentally, the horror of the unfathomable depths was still there, and would be there until the ship was once again accelerating. He drove the horror down into the deepest recesses of his mind—he would never be able to drive it out—and forced himself to think coolly and objectively. He looked at the gelid darkness that surrounded the floating body of the medium—the darkness, the nothingness, the very negation of all vibration—and knew that he would never be able to touch it, to approach it,

even. He felt a hopeless peace flooding his being, overcoming his misery and his fear.

Clumsily, he turned, pushed and pulled his way from the lounge, using the unprotesting bodies of the living dead—and how much longer were they to retain even this semblance of life?—as handholds and buffers. There was a small room just off the lounge, and this he made for. It housed the panatrope which, although used in the main for entertainment, was part of the ship's intercommunication system and, therefore, powered by the emergency batteries.

With fumbling hands, Taylor pulled the tapes from their pigeonholes.

Something loud, he thought vaguely, something brassy, switched through to all speakers and with the amplifier turned to *Full* . . . Something vocal, because *It* hates the sound of human voices . . . Leila McLeod, the brassiest blonde of them all, singing *Venusburg Stomp* . . .

The numbness robbed him of strength and coordination as he threaded the tape through its carriers, as he switched on the player. But he switched it on somehow, and he made the necessary adjustments. He pulled himself close to the control panel, saw in the dim light, through his dimming eyes, that all was in order. He had done what he could do. The rest was up to Leila McLeod, millions of miles away though she was. The rest was up to the singer who, according

to more than one critic, was well qualified to become the champion hog caller of the Solar System.

*Shake that mud
Off your feet,
Shake them to
The tom-tom beat . . .*

The drums, thought Taylor.
The drums. Louder, louder!

*Shake that sweat
From off your brow,
Shake your body,
Shake it now!
Venus sweat
And Venus mud—
Beat of tom-toms
In your blood . . .*

Beat those drums, thought Taylor. Beat those drums . . . And scream, scream, just to show that you can make more noise than they can . . .

*Heavy feet
With Venus mud
On the dance floor
Stomp and thud;
Heavy hearts
Becoming light,
Stomp your troubles
Out of sight!
Out of sight
And out of mind—
Forget the Earth
You left behind . . .*

But I don't want to forget, thought Taylor. Then, his numbness leaving him, God! What a voice!

His hand went out to the vol-

ume control, then checked. He grinned wryly as a not-altogether irrelevant thought flickered through his mind, the memory of what he had read of that other captain, millennia ago, who had stopped the ears of his crew with wax lest they hear the song the sirens sang. But Leila's more like the other sort of siren, he thought, and I want my passengers and my crew to hear her.

Then, in spite of the raucous, screaming voice, in spite of the frenzied thudding of the drums, he became aware of other sounds. There was a pump starting up, there was the whine of the awakened generators. From the lounge came the babble of voices. Suddenly, in mid-note, the music stopped. Frantically, Taylor manipulated the controls of the player, the fear that *It* was strong enough to regain command driving all else from his mind.

A voice came from the speakers, a worried voice, the voice of the officer of the watch. "Will Captain Taylor come to Control, please? Will Captain Taylor come to Control? The Drive has been shut down . . ."

"As though I didn't know," moaned Taylor, his nausea returning.

He was very curt with Mrs. Sanderson when, as he was passing through the lounge on his way to the axial shaft, she upbraided him for ruining the experiment by turning on that *bestly* music and shutting down the Drive.

Taylor put in his report when *Delphic* berthed at Port Gregory.

He was far from happy about it, as he was the only one aboard the ship who knew what had happened. Had it not been for the shutting down of the Drive, the calculations necessary before the ship could be thrown into a new trajectory, the heavy expenditure of reaction mass to establish that trajectory, he would have been willing to believe that he, alone, had suffered from an hallucination. The officers of the watch, in control and engine rooms, remembered nothing. As far as they were concerned, at one moment the ship had been functioning normally, at the next the powerful howling of Leila McLeod had all but shattered their eardrums and, with the recovery from the initial shock, had come the realization that the ship was all but dead.

Taylor put in his report, omitting nothing.

He sat in the office of the Astronautical Superintendent, waiting until that gentleman had finished reading the closely typewritten pages.

"Captain Jones," he said, as the superintendent dropped the papers onto his desk, "I wish to hand in my resignation."

"Why?" asked Jones, raising his bushy eyebrows.

"I let that silly experiment go too far and hazarded my ship and all aboard her. Furthermore . . ." He flushed. "Furthermore, somebody was sick in the

lounge, spacesick, and by the process of elimination everybody—passengers, my own officers—worked out that it could only be me."

"You'll live it down," said Jones. "You'll have to." He picked up the report again. "This will be of great value. We've suspected for a long time that there's something inimical out there, but we've thought of it only as a sort of paralysis that's liable to grip the entire crew of a ship—a paralysis and, insofar as the engineers are concerned, an odd compulsion to shut down the Drive . . . You must have heard of the *Martian Maid* disaster, and the *Thunderchild* affair."

"Of course, I never saw the connection . . ."

"You do now, Captain Taylor. And perhaps you see, too, why it has been the company's policy to have at least one executive officer to each ship who is temperamentally unfitted for life as a spaceman . . ."

"So my spacesickness was never a secret," said Taylor slowly.

"Never a secret," agreed Jones. "You will withdraw your resignation, of course."

"Of course," said Taylor.

"And you can feel proud of what you've always regarded as a weakness."

"If you'd ever been through it yourself," said Taylor bitterly, "you wouldn't say such a damned silly thing!"

THE END

BAIT

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

*She was only a woman, but she carried
the seeds of destruction for an empire.*

THE defense screens showed the Zyganian space fleet only six hours away.

But the tiny Solar Federation ship already was landing at the doomed spaceport on Alpha Centauri VI.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" snarled General Winburg, commander of the Solar outpost. "Whatever the weapon is, it can't be mounted in six hours."

Pleane, the Solar System Strategic Services officer, smiled but said nothing. However little Winburg liked it, Winburg had to follow his orders in this case.

The two, with an assortment of lesser-ranking aides, waited on the windswept runways of the spaceport as the airlock of the little Solar Federation cruiser swung open and the landing ramp rolled out. Pleane's briefing had gone only so far. He was as

surprised as Winburg when the central figure of the group of half a dozen emerging from the cruiser was seen to be a woman.

They stepped forward to greet the landing party. They introduced themselves.

"I am Mary Tewhowa," said the woman, holding out a slim hand. "I'm the Solar Federation agent."

"Mary," repeated Pleane, holding her hand and gazing into the dark-skinned face. "It's an old-fashioned name, but appropriate. You're a brave woman, my child."

She smiled.

"People have to be brave in war," she answered quietly.

"The Zyganians are human, and I don't believe you'll be badly treated," said Pleane. "They know you hold a secret, and you must hold out against their ques-

tioning as long as you can. Time is the most important factor."

"I understand that," she said. "You're sure the . . . weapon . . . will be effective against them?"

"Certain," said Pleane. "Like other interstellar humans, the Zyganians' ancestors were from Earth. The 'weapon' stayed on Earth, and eventually the Zyganians lost the knowledge that could defend against it. We're sure it will weaken this fleet so our ships can move in and make a capture. Without it, we aren't strong enough to keep them from moving against the Solar System itself."

"Then, whatever sacrifice is required of me is worthwhile," she said.

The aides took over the duty of escorting her, and she moved away toward the humped buildings of the base—a base that soon would surrender without a fight to the Zyganians. Pleane and Winburg stood looking after

her for a few moments, then followed the cruiser's crew into the little ship.

The rocket engines roared and the ship lifted.

"I don't like leaving my men here, even to join the Solar System fleet," said Winburg glumly. "A commander should stay with his men."

"You know too much of our strategy to permit your capture," answered Pleane. "It's necessary that neither of us be here when the Zyganians arrive."

"I know too much!" exploded Winburg. "I know too much! This woman comes here with the secret of a new weapon, and you allow her to be captured, deliberately. And you say I know too much!"

"The weapon is not what she knows, but what she is," answered Pleane. "Mary Tewhowa is what once on Earth would have been called 'a typhoid carrier'."

THE END

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 5)

wide open! It would take an entire issue of this magazine just to summarize the answers. Suffice it to say they ranged from "Leave it as is!" to "Fire the present staff!"

We'll do our best to merit all the nice things you said, and to improve the things you didn't like. What we learned mostly from the results was that science-fiction readers are just like science-fiction editors: Give them half a chance and they'll disagree like crazy!

Seriously, thanks a lot for all your help.—NL

It was bad enough to be in a strange city on an alien world, without food or weapons. But then he heard gunfire—which was impossible, for he was a . . .

MAN ALONE

By WILLIAM SCARFF

SECOND OFFICER MORGAN had built the fire out of a broken canned-goods case and shredded paper, and laid it against the hull of the crashed three-man ship, out of the wind. The air was rich enough to support a wan sort of combustion, but the biggest fire he dared build, with no native fuel in sight, could only be a compromise. If he huddled on one side of the fire and Cleve, the insane mutineer, crouched a few feet away on the other, they could stay warm enough to live. Not much more.

If it weren't night, Morgan thought, and we were farther south. If the ship weren't full of poisonous fuel fumes, and if Captain Lewis hadn't died.

Morgan was too much aware of his own youth and inexperience. The rifle he hugged to his

chest gave him no sense of safety or assurance. He looked across the fire at the broad-faced, grizzled engineer, and knew that any time the man made a determined effort to escape, only a miracle would prevent him from succeeding.

Second Officer Morgan pulled the ship's blanket more tightly together across his chest. Overhead, the bright, clear, and totally unfamiliar stars speckled the cold sky. A hundred yards away on his left, the first buildings of the dead alien city thrust up above the scalloped sand dunes and hummed nerve-wrackingly in the wind. The city stretched for miles—what was left of it, with the desert creeping over its edges, choking its streets to an unguessable depth, burying the suburbs and leaving only the city's heart itself.

If I knew where we were, Second Officer Morgan thought, watching Cleve watch him. If I knew what kind of people had built this place. There might be some kind of communicator I could use. If I knew what to look for.

"Lad," Cleve said softly from across the fire. The hairy hands clutching the edges of the blanket were blue with cold. "Lad, you know it was the captain's fault."

Morgan looked aside, to where the sheet-wrapped body of Captain Lewis lay stretched out flat and white, the profile stylized by the tight cloth. There was no reason why Captain Lewis' crash belts should have broken while his and Cleve's held. Unless Cleve had somehow weakened them, the same way he had sabotaged the drive and smashed the course computer. It could have been done a long time ago, with surreptitious drops of acid, just as the weakened components in the drive generator hadn't shown up until months after Cleve had originally been caught while flailing with a wrench through the opened inspection panels of the course computer. They hadn't thought he might already have finished a piece of much subtler work on the drive.

"He didn't treat me right, laddie. Work, work, work—never a minute for relaxing. He shouldn't have knocked that bottle out of my hand that time, laddie," Cleve explained patiently. "That broke it, and I didn't have any more."

So you sabotaged the ship to get back at him, Morgan thought. But he didn't dare say it.

"And he shouldn't have put me in irons," Cleve pressed his case. "No matter what I did. Because look what happened: The two of you had to try and bring the ship back over three hundred light years, navigating with a paper and pencil. Round the clock at the controls and in the engine compartment. Why, you were so busy you never noticed the drive wasn't acting right. Not until it broke down all the way." Cleve spread his hands momentarily. "Was that reasonable, for the captain to act that way, making things work out so badly? You're *still* tired from all that, laddie—you're out on your feet right this minute. You can hardly stand up."

Second Officer Morgan braced his weight against the rifle's support. He looked at Cleve in hopeless fascination.

"Poor laddie," Cleve murmured solicitously. "The captain should not have got you into a spot like this."

When Morgan awoke, Cleve and the rifle were gone. Footprints led toward and into the city. Morgan snatched up the respirator, left lying beside him, and ran into the ship. Cleve had taken food and water, and the rifle ammunition. There was a note impaled on the sharp tip of a broken spar. In blocky, engineer's printing, Cleve had said:

I don't like leaving you alone, laddie. But I have to find a radio and call Earth before you do. I have to tell my side of the story first.

E. C.

Dully, Morgan made his way past the traces of Captain Lewis' death and took a sidearm out of the locker in the forward cabin. He filled his pockets with ammunition clips, and then made up a pack of supplies out of the tiny galley. The great bulk of the ship's food, stored in the afterhold, had been hopelessly contaminated by the corrosive fuel.

Before he left the ship, Second Officer Morgan removed the log from the safe, brought it up to date, signed it as Officer Commanding, and took it outside. He piled a cone of the red, rotten desert stone over Captain Lewis' body, and placed the metal-jacketed log among the rocks near the point of the cairn. Then he set out toward the city. As he floundered up the steep face of a dune that had already been formed by the wind sweeping around the ship, he closed his eyes to slits and thought of how pitifully easy it had been for Cleve. There had been no need to make a dramatic break for it, or to wrestle for the rifle.

It did not quite occur to Second Officer Morgan that months of standing twelve-hour watches in the control compartment, followed by twelve hours in the engine room snatching bits of sleep on a bedding roll, might

have weakened him more than physically. He could remember, somewhat hazily, that the first weeks of that routine had been hard to bear, but that in time he had acquired a sort of selective numbness which let him concentrate on his work to the exclusion of any other interest. He did not recall at all that, for the past few weeks, the less immediately urgent parts of his work had also escaped his notice. He could remember only that he had been feeling continually uneasy for many days now, even before the drive failed, without any particular reason for it that he could see.

He felt uneasy now, standing in Cleve's tracks atop the sand dune and looking at the city.

It must once have been a place of great, fragile beauty. Certainly its towers and delicately arched connecting ways must have glowed with soft colors to complement their perfect architecture. There must have been gardens, pennons, moving spots of color that were people on its ways, vehicles in its streets, possibly even aircraft with metal and glass surfaces sparkling in the sun.

It was still a place to excite an archeologist. But the streets were empty. Black, blank openings stood hollow where glass had been. There was no trace of the gardens, and the pennon masts were bare. The connecting ways were empty ribbons in the air between the towers, and the desert had bleached everything—wall,

tower, mast and way—into a dull, bone-yellow wash. There was only a memory of beauty here, and less than that of life.

Cleve's footprints, softening under the daytime breeze, disappeared between two buildings. Morgan thought of how easily the rifle could cover a man coming across the sand toward the city, cocked his sidearm with its insignificant accuracy at long ranges, and moved forward down the dune's long slope.

He lost Cleve's footprints as soon as he was well in among the buildings. The sand gradually sloped down until it reached street level, and there were many bare places. The buildings towered up on either side, their size oppressive. These people must have had aircraft, he thought parenthetically and without much logic. He came down the streets, conscious of his size, seeing himself in his mind's eye as if from the tops of the towers, and when he reached the first bare place and set his foot on the city's actual fabric for the first time, all his nerves tingled.

When the distant sun was directly overhead, he stopped. He was at the intersection of two broad streets, where a pillar rose up for a forgotten monument out of a small central square. Morgan turned slowly, looking along the streets and up at the empty windows and balconies. Any of them could have hidden Cleve.

Since he had first lost the engineer's tracks, Morgan had been

simply moving forward. He realized now, with faint surprise, that Cleve really *had* escaped—that any of these buildings would have hidden him beyond any one man's finding. He realized now that he must have known this immediately, and had continued to move only for the sake of doing something.

He shouted: "Cleeeeee . . . Cleeeeee!"

Somewhere out among the buildings, perhaps down one of the other streets, he thought he heard a faint noise not part of the echo that came lingeringly back to him. But he couldn't be sure, and one more uncertainty only made him more tense.

He began to formulate a plan. He could never hunt Cleve down. But if the engineer were really going to try to find a communicator, Cleve would also have to move from building to building. Morgan would constitute a threat to his freedom, and so Cleve might very well feel a need to make sure he was alone.

Second Officer Morgan tried to put himself in Cleve's place. *Was* there any use in looking for a communicator of some kind?

There were a few vehicles half-buried in the sand, lying tipped on their sides or roofs, with many parts obviously removed. That came as no particular surprise to Morgan. It seemed reasonable to him that a city's last days might mean a culture giving up its luxuries and converting useless parts to more basic uses. The sheet metal of a car

door, for example, could be worked into many things such as cooking utensils, or shields. It was the preservation of the remaining parts that interested him. In this mummifying air, even upholstery had not completely vanished, and the flexible material of the tires had not visibly rotted at all. The metal was bare of paint, but free of corrosion. If, somewhere, the people here had left a working radio, it might still work.

Second Officer Morgan, no more than Cleve, did not stop to think of the difficulties connected with operating a totally alien radio, or with trying to convert it to broadcast on interstellar wavelengths. He did not stop to think at all on the problem of power supply. He felt a vague sense that there was something wrong with his summation of things. It added to his general feeling of dis-focused uneasiness, and no more.

"Cleeve!"

This time, except for the echo, there was no sound at all.

He had to find some way of attracting Cleve to him. If he could get the engineer to show himself once, then he could probably follow him from there, and learn which building he had entered. If he could obtain a general idea of Cleve's sphere of movement, then he might have an opportunity to close in far enough to get within his sidearm's accuracy.

What he would do then, Second Officer Morgan couldn't quite de-

cide. But it was vital to develop the situation to that point.

He schooled himself to careful thought. Still circling warily around the pillar, he gnawed lightly on his lips. It began to seem to him that Cleve, if he fired, would certainly miss his first shot. A spaceman might estimate sizes within a hull quite accurately, or be a good judge of intervals measured in thousands of miles. But in the intermediate ranges of a city, probably firing downward from a window or balcony, using a weapon with which he might be unfamiliar, he would certainly miss the first shot.

It seemed to Morgan that he could get to the pillar's cover before the second could hit him. Then he would know where Cleve was, and everything else would follow from that.

But first he had to provoke Cleve into firing at him.

"All right, Cleve, I see you!" he shouted. Raising his sidearm, he fired a full clip up at the buildings all around him, and took a step toward the pillar.

Chips of masonry sprayed out from the buildings and fell into the square. The rapid-fire *crack-crack-crack* of his shots filled the air. His twenty shots had spread almost indiscriminately, and all around him there were buildings with dinner-plate sized chips knocked out of their facings, exposing blue and red plastic interlacings like the color-coded veins and arteries of a dissected specimen frog. The buildings had been pockmarked at all elevations

from a hundred to five hundred feet, showing no kind of pattern. He was shocked at how ugly they looked, and he slapped a new magazine into place.

After a time, he realized he was standing exposed with the sidearm in his hand, half-crouched to leap to shelter, but that Cleve hadn't fired back. He swiveled his head without moving his shoulders or coming out of his crouch, and he felt very small. After a while he began moving again, and left the square.

The first shot did not come until nearly dusk. Second Officer Morgan was crossing a sand hillock in a street that faced directly into the desert, when there was a whine in the air a few inches before his face, a thump from a fountain of sand to his right, and a faint, inhuman cough from a point hundreds of feet away to his left.

He whirled toward the belated sound of the shot; toward a bluff-faced building with hundreds of windows, and saw a scrap of paper fluttering down. He ran toward it, picked it up, and found it was a note.

The blocky printing said:

Lad:

Do anything you want to. But leave the city alone. It isn't yours to deface.

Trembling with rage, Second Officer Morgan crouched down in the sand and methodically tried to put a shot through each of the building's windows. He

missed quite often, hitting the masonry instead. It took a long time. Then darkness fell, and he burrowed into the sand, holding his sidearm out of the way, paying no attention to the grains that worked their way into his clothes.

Shivering with cold, he waited out the night. The night wind came up, and the city thrummed.

He was stiff and cramped in the morning. His eyelids were full of sand. He brushed his hands against his trouser legs to clean them off, and found he had to brush off his clothes before he could clean his hands to wipe his eyes. He held the pistol against the side of his chest under his arm, and was very conscious of his exposed position. As soon as he could see, he ducked into a cross street and moved quickly away.

He had hardly slept during the night. He felt exhausted enough to take definite notice of his condition, and became quite worried. He had been forced to stay as alert as possible all night. Cleve had probably stretched out and gotten a good sleep. Cleve hadn't had anything to do for months but sleep and exercise as much as his shackles would let him.

It was vitally necessary to find shelter and safety. Second Officer Morgan was surprised at his not having thought of it yesterday. At the realization that he had actually wasted an entire day in pursuit of Cleve, instead of for-

tifying a secure retreat, Morgan found himself momentarily appalled.

He had already turned toward the nearest open doorway when the burst of rifle bullets tore the sand where he had been. The confused sound of the shots might have come from anywhere, this time. He darted sideward and ran back across the street at an angle, hoping to mask himself from Cleve's fire. He ran with his arms windmilling. There was an enormous shock in his arm as a bullet hit his pistol and tore it out of his fingers, bloodying them. He actually stopped and stared at the smashed weapon skidding away over the pavement. Then he broke into an even more desperate run, with single rifle shots pacing him and driving him forward until he at last reached a corner and could fling himself around it.

He let himself slide down until he was sitting with his back to the wall, his arms extended stiffly from his sides to where his palms against the sidewalk braced him upright. He breathed deeply and carefully, his system flooded with adrenalin and his brain unfogged for the first time since his entrance into the city. He could think clearly.

Cleve was driving him. The engineer could have killed him at any time, but for some reason was forcing him onto a definite line of flight. Whatever his purpose, that pressure had to be blunted. No matter what the engineer might be planning, Mor-

gan had to take back the initiative. Unarmed.

But there were other sidearms in the ship. If he hadn't lost himself hopelessly, he might be able to reach it. His best plan was to wait for dark, and not to move no matter what Cleve did. He had to wait it out.

Second Officer Morgan got to his feet. He took three quick sideward steps, found a doorway, and slipped into it. Without even stopping to see what might be in this anteroom, he crossed its moderate length, opened the closed door in the far wall, saw it was neither closet, elevator shaft or cul-de-sac, stepped through it, and tried the automobile-type door handle to be sure he didn't lock himself in, before he closed it.

The room was beautifully furnished, its fabrics and colors perfectly preserved because it had no windows. The ceiling glowed softly down on oddly designed couches that faced outward from a central planter in the tessellated floor. Low tables sat in front of the couches, with beautiful crafted but unrecognizable objects on them. The dead leaves in the planter were the only sign that time had passed since the room was last entered.

Morgan poked curiously at the furniture. All the legs were designed to telescope. The backs and seats of the couches slid open so they could be widened or narrowed at a touch. There was a fantastic range of adjustments—

an obese giant could have lived in this room as easily as a pygmy.

On the other side of the plant-er was a totally different group of furniture.

One of the pieces was like a bed, and beside it was something like a bureau. Squat, heavy, worn things, set to their maximum sizes, they matched neither themselves nor the rest of the room. Only the feel of the thin blanket, dry and ready to crumble, trailing one end on the floor, gave any hint of how long ago these pieces had been dragged into this room from somewhere else. Clothing was piled on top of the bureau—as dirty, crumpled and un-human as when their owner had apparently tired of his own careless housekeeping and moved to some other room in some other part of the dying city. Morgan could vaguely imagine him, one of what must have been a steadily diminishing group of survivors, taking what they wanted, using it, finally abandoning it, as if it were much like their life itself.

Pictures hung on the walls. Morgan glanced at them and found his attention caught.

The technique was almost tortuously photographic, the colors vivid but unexaggerated. The particular one that he had chosen to look at, nearest the door he had entered, showed a non-human spaceship landing on a grassy plain at the edge of the lovingly depicted city, and two small biped creatures watching it. First Officer Morgan made

nothing of it. He looked toward the next. It showed the ship standing on extended landing gear, its portal open, and a disproportionately thin, reddish being with long forearms, four walking limbs, and an exoskeleton, facing the two bipeds.

The third painting still showed the alien ship, overrun with decay. Two of the exoskeletoid centaurs were watching a different sort of ship come down.

Frowning, Morgan looked at the third painting. A furry, ursine crewman was climbing down a thickset ladder from the second ship. The fourth painting showed two ships now, the first almost crumbled, and two bearish creatures stood looking upward with an unmistakable air of expectation about them as though something special was about to happen.

It was the same all the way around the room. Ship after ship, and always the same sequence of events.

The last painting brought him back to the door. The city had changed gradually in each picture, evolving toward a glorious peak and then, gradually, passing it while the desert crept toward it. But even in that last painting it was still beautiful, still treated with appreciation by the artist. For the first time, Morgan noticed a corner of worn paper from Cleve's wallet protruding from behind the edge of the frame. He pulled it out and saw it was another note:

Lad:

This city wasn't built for you or by you. You have no right to smash at it.

First Officer Morgan found himself actually trembling with outrage. He ripped the picture loose and flung it across the room. It bust out of its shattered frame and tore on the sharp corner of a table.

"Cleve! Cleve! I'll tear this place apart if I have to! But I'll catch you!"

Then he flung open the door and ran out of the building.

Carefully placed rifle shots drove him headlong through the city. He was peripherally aware of running through the intersection where the central pillar stood, but the shots were giving him no time to spend on any one thought. He felt more and more outraged at being herded this way, and not even so much at being herded as at being forced to move so quickly that he could formulate no plan. He grew angrier and angrier at Cleve, and this, not fear, was his dominant emotion. He threw a glance over his shoulder and saw Cleve leaning casually against a corner, steadying the rifle for the next shot.

He came, finally, to the street that he had first entered. A hoarse shout of joy gusted out of his strained throat. If he could get to the ship, he was safe and rearmed. He threw himself at the slope of sand that led up to

the desert, arms and legs scrambling.

"Cleve! What're you doing?"

More shots drove him toward the low doorway on his left. Sand had poured into it and down a flight of steps, forming a loose, treacherous ramp. Second Officer Morgan, jumping for it blindly, barely checked himself with one hand on the doorframe. He clung to it, then cautiously let go. Peering ahead of him into the unlighted gloom, he slid gingerly down the hill of sand into the deep basement. Only the bar of sunlight from the doorway fell down the slope.

Morgan had been lucky. A man foundering down that slope, losing his balance and then tumbling over, might well break his neck against the rough paving of the floor. Cleve, escaping in the dark after Morgan fell asleep at the fire, hadn't been as fortunate.

He lay sprawled out and naked, his skin sere and taut from the well-advanced work of the dry air. There were marks where his rifle had fallen, and where something that left broad pug marks with its bare feet had taken his clothes and the weapon, had changed the shape of its feet, and walked away in Cleve's boots.

A shadow fell across Morgan. He turned his head upward. Cleve's duplicate, outraged civic pride and stern judgment written on his face, was standing in the doorway and looking down at Morgan without a trace of compassion in his eyes. **THE END**

Even the Last War couldn't end hatred. But then the Observers came, and assured each survivor of his rightful...

PLACE IN THE SUN

By T. D. HAMM

THE ship came spiralling in a thousand miles above the Earth's atmosphere, above the slag heaps which had been cities, and the deserts which had been fertile plains. Over the Poles and above tropical jungles, and everywhere desolation...

The ship's Observer was conscious of fragments of the thoughts drifting between the watchers below—"what a waste; and fifty years ago it was so beautiful..."—"Could we have prevented it?"

His thought cut in sharply, "They also were given the rules; our task now to help only in the re-birth. But... are any left?"

The polished golden sphere powered only by the wills of the crew drifted on, as they scanned the screen which would record

the thought waves of any intelligence left.

Faint colors drifted and pulsed across the encephalometer, growing and deepening as they approached. Over the ruined Earth lay a black roiling cloud of hate and destruction... and like a sudden burst of sunshine, a clear ray of joy and laughter.

The crew looked at each other with a quick radiance... "Children! Some at least have not forgotten how to love... and to hope!"

And with each break in the sullen cloud, a golden needle dropped swiftly and lifted again bearing the pathetically few who were the seed of new worlds. Tirelessly they kept their vigil and again and again the golden needles went and returned. From the last came the thought, "There are no more of these.

Only those who brought the Destruction are left."

The Observer's thought met theirs calmly. "There is evil here. We must see what it is that they feared."

The great continents unrolled beneath them, scarred and soiled with the debris of anguish and hate, the screen bare and empty of life. A great mountain chain appeared—and suddenly the thought screen was alive again. Appalled, they watched the murky colors roiling, thicker and darker, as they neared the snowy peaks.

The dispassionless features of the Observer hardened. "This is the home of the evil; these control the rest. See their exultance . . . in a few days they will have completed the weapon that will leave them the masters of a dead world. And in a thousand years . . . or a million . . . our task to be done again."

An eager thought cut through . . . "Let us try once more . . . even with these. Give me leave, Brothers . . ."

There was a silent, questioning thought from the Observer, an eager, joyous assent from the others.

Like a falling star, the golden needle slipped through the sky and settled on a flowering meadow ringed by the snowy peaks. Joar stepped from the ship and sent a mellow call echoing and re-echoing from the cliffs.

Like troglodytes from an earlier world, the inhabitants of the caves, the destroyers of the

Earth appeared, cautiously, heads and weapons alone showing. Moments passed and then as they saw the lone golden figure by the golden ship, they came running and stumbling down the slope of the meadow.

Blond and arrogant, slit-eyed and dark, yellow-skinned and brown, alike only in their common heritage of greed and hatred, they poured toward the ship.

Joar, the Companion, arms folded and ostentatiously unarmed, repressed a feeling of dismay. These dirty, unkempt savages, the representatives of the highest technical advance of Man? Scrupulously fair, he reminded himself that living in caves in terror of their lives was not conducive to the niceties of civilization. Nevertheless, his nose wrinkled . . . surely, there was at least a mountain spring for bathing?

They huddled together a cautious distance from the strange ship and the shimmering figure regarding them with sorrowful golden eyes.

The leader, well behind the front row, barked a sudden guttural sentence.

Joar, well-schooled in Galactic languages, repressed a feeling of annoyance at being addressed as a "Capitalist Imperialistic Dog" and swung into a peroration in faultless Russian. Earnestly he assured them that they were in great danger; that the Galaxy had placed him and his Companions at their service for

the good of humanity. Disregarding their sullen, suspicious faces, he stressed his superiors' reasoning, that with nine-tenths of the world's population destroyed, obviously the only desire of all concerned could be to save what remained. The Galaxy therefore had opened its storehouses for their benefit.

"A star-ship, da? What do you bring? What new weapons...?"

Joar smiled. "Food, tools..."

"Fool!" snarled the bearded one and shot him neatly between the eyes.

They swarmed over the ship.

"Metals! Metals enough for a hundred bombs! In a week we will own the world. And next year—or the next... the stars!"

A million miles above, the Ob-

server's command came softly.

"Recall Joar's thought and rebode it. And calm the Earthlings... there are many worlds prepared for the sons of men. But this world is dead... it only remains to destroy the maggots that feed upon it. Are your wills with mine, Brothers?"

The ship trembled with the voiceless lightnings of channeled thought that would trigger the nuclei of every atom of Terrene matter in its path.

Below the bearded one raised his voice in a scream of hysteria.

"Comrades! At last... our place in the Sun!"

And it was indeed, the most magnificent sun reported in the Galaxy for several millennia.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF AMAZING STORIES, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1958.

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Business manager, Howard Stoughton, Jr., 1 Park Avenue, New York 16, New York.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)

Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 434 So. Wabash Avenue, Chicago 1, Illinois.

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3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and tri-weekly newspapers only.)

HOWARD STOUGHTON, Jr.,

Business Manager

[SEAL]

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 18th day of September, 1958.

WILLIAM PROEHMER, Notary Public

(My commission expires March 30, 1960.)

LOWER ANIMALS AND HIGHER COURTS

By IRWIN PORGES

Have you ever felt like slapping a subpoena on a mosquito? Or suing a Japanese beetle for damages? It's been done before.

ONE of the strangest trials in history has begun. The prosecuting attorney, in his opening address, speaks indignantly of the destruction of valuable property belonging to the plaintiffs. He demands justice and swift punishment for the criminals.

The magistrate, who is trying the case, and the defense attorney are both listening intently to the list of accusations against the defendants. But there is one thing that seems wrong with the entire courtroom scene: the defendants are not there. Taking it all in all, they are the most peculiar aggregation of law-breakers ever to be judged in court, and their behavior can only be described as mystifying. Failure to appear at one's own trial is unusual; but when you add the facts that the defendants

are unaware that a trial is taking place, are unconcerned about their own guilt, and are completely indifferent to the judge's verdict, you have a situation that's difficult to understand.

Wine Makers vs. Insects

Even though his clients are absent, the defense attorney arises to make his plea:

My clients' rights are based upon priority. Their ancestors occupied these lands before anyone else lived in the area. They cannot be denied some means of support. In making a living on these lands they are only exercising a legitimate right which was guaranteed to them at creation.

Unbelievable as it may sound, in this trial, which took place in the middle ages, a group of ex-

asperated wine manufacturers were bringing suit against the insects who had been destroying the grapes in a French vineyard. Insects and animals who violated the laws were considered delinquent creatures, and in this case the manufacturers demanded that the culprits be expelled from the vineyards and ordered never to return.

The medieval courts took great pains to judge these cases fairly, scrupulously protecting the rights of both parties. No case could proceed until legal counsel was appointed for the insects or animals involved.

As the trial continued, the defense attorney offered an argument which was hard to refute. Turning to the world's most venerated book, the Holy Bible, he quoted from the chapter of Genesis where it states that the lower animals were created before man. How, he inquired, could the insects be denied the ownership of the land that they had occupied before man had even appeared on the earth? The prosecutor, while conceding that the insects were there first, insisted that they were obviously intended to be subject to man's will.

Postponements in law cases of the middle ages were as common as they are today, and the trial dragged on for some years without a verdict being reached. Growing tired of the law's dilly-dallying, the townspeople decided to work out a compromise

which would be acceptable to both the insects and the owners of the vineyards. A public meeting was announced to which all animals and humans were invited. The purpose was to consider a plan for providing the insects with a new home. A tract of land was to be set aside as an insect reservation, with the cautious French retaining all water and mineral rights! In order to persuade the insects that they were not being pushed around, there was a clause in the agreement which guaranteed them perpetual ownership of the land.

Just when it appeared that the compromise plan might be successful, a snag developed. The defense attorney went over to view the land which was being offered to his clients and returned in great indignation, reporting that he had been unable to find enough vegetation to provide the insects with a square meal.

Court delays piled up, with further quibbling by both sides, and accordingly, just as in today's trials, a committee of experts was appointed to go out and examine the grounds.

The final decision has never been revealed and never will be. In fact, nobody knows whether the court ever arrived at a verdict, for the closing pages of the trial records, when discovered, were illegible. However, an examination of the torn, ragged edges of the partially consumed pages leads to a logical conclusion. The prosecuted (and perse-

cuted) insects, irked over the outcome of the trial, arose in their wrath and marched into the archives to use their own methods of annulling the court's verdict. At any rate, it appears that the bugs had the last word.

Farmers vs. Field Mice

Lawsuits against insects and animals, which appear ridiculous today, were common in the middle ages. In Tyrol, farmers became angered at the moles and field mice who were damaging the crops by throwing up earth so that the green plants were covered. At the trial which followed, counsel for the field mice pleaded that the court should consider the great benefits his clients had given the community by destroying insect pests. He urged that if any sentence was given it should be a sentence to depart, and that another home should be provided. He also insisted that he would agree to no judgment unless a safe conduct was arranged for his clients so that they would not be harmed or annoyed by dogs or cats en route. Certainly no client could have had a more dedicated and determined counsel than these put-upon insects.

The tender-hearted magistrate not only granted the mice a new home and a safe conduct, but pledged a fourteen-day reprieve to babies who were too young to be moved, and to pregnant mothers who might be harmed by the journey!

Leniency for Beetles

Another considerate judge, in weighing the case of some beetles who had been infesting farm land, excused them for not appearing in court for trial, and expressed the opinion that owing to their young age and small size they should be accorded all the benefits which the law customarily grants minors. The baffled bugs were informed, however, that they must confine themselves to only part of the land.

Meticulous middle-agers had their own way of dealing with delinquent caterpillars who were devouring a field of grain. After the farmers demanded that these creatures be summoned to appear in court, the sheriff hastened to oblige by issuing five copies of the summonses and posting them on trees in the fields where the caterpillars were foraging. At the court proceedings the insects were ordered to get out of the cultivated fields and return to their natural domain in the forest.

A Brilliant Plea

Those creatures who were fortunate enough to be defended by a really ingenious counsel were able to crawl through a loophole in the law's defenses. When the waters of the Berne area in Switzerland became infested with leeches, a bailiff was sent out to subpoena these pesky crea-

tures to appear at a designated day and hour before the magistrate. They were subpoenaed three times and did not appear. The irate judge who demanded of the defense attorney why his clients hadn't shown up received an answer which rivals any used in court today. The defense attorney maintained, first of all, that the subpoena had not been in order. He then pointed out that the leeches had not *all* been summoned. But the crowning argument was when he informed the judge that the leeches had been away from home at the time the subpoena was served!

Dolphins Abide the Decision

When a large number of dolphins entered the port of Marseilles and took over the off-shore area so that all the smaller fish were chased away, the law moved hastily to hold court on the spot and deal firmly with the culprits. Before an immense crowd of spectators, the dolphins were ordered to remove themselves from the port and not return. It is reported that the obliging dolphins, realizing the error of their ways, departed in good grace.

Monks vs. Termites

Even termites were guaranteed a fair trial. In a Brazilian monastery these insects had been guilty of consuming food, gnawing their way through furniture, and weakening the walls of the

building. The patient monks finally decided to start legal proceedings. Counsel for the defense offered the standard argument that his clients, the termites, had been there before the monastery was constructed, and thus had prior rights. This argument proved of no avail, but at the plea of the monks another area was set aside for the termites and they were urged to depart in peace and do no further harm.

The records in the case reveal that as soon as the official order of the magistrate was read before the hills of the termites they understood that the game was up, and began trekking in long columns to their new homes.

Ignorance Is No Excuse

The courts had a great deal of trouble with animals who didn't seem to understand local regulations. Especially guilty were pigs who stubbornly violated all the traffic rules. Ignorance of the law was no excuse as far as the medieval magistrates were concerned. Pigs who persisted in using the highways and blocking traffic could be thrown in jail or even executed, and these penalties were most vigorously enforced on the Sabbath, since the swine should have been aware of the seriousness of gallivanting about on Sunday!

A pig that had injured a child was sentenced to be hanged. Dressed in man's clothes, the

confused porker was taken to the public square in front of the city hall where, before a large crowd, the executioner did his duty.

The two herds of pigs feeding near a large town never realized that they were due to become involved in serious criminal proceedings. However, the law must have felt that they should have understood the dangers of running in gangs. Three members of the porcine mob attacked a small boy and killed him. They were given a quick trial and sentenced to death. But as the rest of these gangsters had also been present, had hurried to the scene of the crime, and emitted squeals of approval, they were presumed to be accessories to the crime! They were found equally guilty and received the death sentence. The frantic owner, seeing himself on the verge of bankruptcy, petitioned the Duke of Burgundy to spare the remainder of the gang. After consideration, the Duke granted them a pardon and placed them on probation.

Man's Best Accessory

Under an old German law, animals are regarded as reasoning, responsible creatures who should know what their masters are up to. Thus when a man commits a crime of violence, all the animals in the house may be considered accessories and given the same sentence as their master. A man who took his greyhound hunting in violation of the game laws was fined, but the poor animal

was sentenced to be executed. After an appeal to a higher court the death sentence was annulled.

Dogs who got involved in political activities with their masters, during certain periods in history, were liable to severe penalties. During the French revolution, a dog who presumably shared the "reactionary" tendencies of his master attacked a vendor of liberal magazines, and almost chewed him to a pulp. Both master and animal were found guilty of anti-revolutionary acts and sentenced to the guillotine.

Eviction—Not Extermination

One of the funniest legal proceedings was the practice of issuing eviction notices against rats who infested houses. It was quite common to serve a writ of ejectment on a rat, and to make certain he would not overlook the document, it was usually dipped in grease, rolled up, and pushed down the rat-hole. Sometimes the more diplomatic policy was followed of sending the rats a friendly warning or a note of advice to get out.

A letter of this type, written in 1888, referred to the rodents as "Messrs. Rats and Company," and after expressing solicitude for the rats' health and comfort, suggested that their winter quarters in the house might be uncomfortable and short of food. The author asked that they move to another address where

(Continued on page 53)

THE SPECTROSCOPE

by S. E. COTTS

THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU. *By H. G. Wells, 192 pp. Ace Science Fiction Classic. Paper: 35¢.*

This effort, on the part of Ace Books, to reprint certain high water marks in past science fiction seems like one answer to the recurring plea in the reader's column of *Amazing*. In fact, it was the many reader requests for the reprinting of the old classics that led me to review this H. G. Wells book though it has generally been my practice to review only new fiction in this column.

This classic of scientific horror has lost none of its chill though it was first published in 1896. Part of this is due to Wells' consummate ability as a master of narrative. But that is not the whole story. His style is just as fresh today as it must have seemed when he first wrote the book, something that is not true of all the classics that so many readers nostalgically remember. There are very few passages that seem dated or antiquated, even though our prose today is much faster paced.

Wells has written more than a horror story, however. Though none of us have had experiences remotely like those of Edward Prendick, the hero, it is quite easy to feel a sense of identification with his problems. There is no pat ending, either. The mental unease that torments him after his escape from the island, and the search for solitude after his return to the city are the only possible ways that one could expect him to feel after what he has been through. Such trueness of character is, perhaps, the most outstanding feature of an outstanding book.

FIVE GALAXY SHORT NOVELS. *Edited by H. L. Gold. 287 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc. \$3.95.*

H. L. Gold has an eye for picking good stories. Here, instead of the usual collection of short stories, he has given us five novelettes. The authors represented are Knight, Sturgeon, Gunn, McIntosh and Wallace. This greater length is a happy occurrence not only because of the high standard of the writing, but also because the topics covered are some of the juiciest ones in the field—immortality, matter transportation, and extrasensory perception among others.

The collection is a happy blend of humor, romance, suspense, and sheer inventiveness. The stories, strictly speaking, are not all science fiction. More than one would do better under the label, fantasy.

But it would be foolish to quibble about the classification in the face of such diverting entertainment.

A MAN CALLED DESTINY. *By Lan Wright. 128 pp. Ace Books. Paper: 35¢.*

Despite its unprepossessing exterior, this book has quite a bit to recommend it. A number of ideas have been covered quite satisfactorily in an unusually short space.

A tone of suspense is set from the first chapter. Richard Argyle, the hero, finds that he is recognized on a far planet by a stranger who brings him word of his wife's death. In Argyle's search for some clue to this event, we are introduced to the mores and politics of a new kind of tycoon. With the development of inter-Galactic trade, the trading barons were born. These men carved empires for themselves on the planets of lonely stars. Before Earth realized their strength, they had a stranglehold on galactic trade.

The story follows the fortunes of Argyle from the beginning when he is merely a third-rate engineer to his destiny when he begins to realize his strange powers; from when he first learns of his wife's death to when he solves the mystery and realizes her sacrifice.

This may not be the most breath-taking science fiction you'll ever read, but it accomplishes what it set out to do in a highly commendable way. This is no mean feat.

LOWER ANIMALS AND HIGHER COURTS

(Continued from page 51)

they would find more conveniences, and promised to treat them fairly if his advice was followed. Should they ignore his kindly efforts, he would have no choice but to resort to "Rough-on-Rats!"

The Feathered Lawbreaker

On rare occasions animals because of impudence and daring got off scot free.

During an Italian demonstration against Austrian control there were many shouts by the crowd of "Vive la France," since the French had been sympathetic

toward Italian independence. The enraged commissioner of police, after dispersing the crowd, was astonished to hear a blackbird trill a few bars of a French revolutionary song.

The fowl was captured and carried to his office where the penalty was to be considered. However, the bird was not easily intimidated, and as soon as he arrived did his best to entertain the commissioner by repeating the same treasonable song. There is no record of his execution. It is presumed this feathered lawbreaker had proved more than a match for man-made law!

...OR SO YOU SAY

Dear Editor:

On your November issue of *Amazing*—cover wasn't bad, but wasn't the ant supposed to be six feet tall and didn't he attack the girl from the bushes near the road?

"Legacy of Terror," "World Beyond Pluto," "Moon Glow" and "Clear View" were all excellent, especially "Moon Glow." "Mission: Murder" was better than average, but I just couldn't get interested in "The Planet Savers."

I'm anxious to see the outcome of your reader service.

Vic Ryan
2160 Sylvan
Springfield, Ill.

● *For a report on the results of our questionnaire, Vic, read this month's Editorial.*

Dear Ed:

I have read several letters in *Amazing* to the effect that some s-f readers do not like the monthly novel. I am happy to see that I am not alone in this, so please let me go on record as being against this novel. I would also like to see a longer and more interesting editorial. Not that the editorials are uninteresting, but an editorial of the type Campbell writes might be well received.

There is not a large enough variety of authors and writers who have stories published. You should not have the same writers month after month. A little variety would help.

George H. Wagner
46 Harrison Avenue
Bellevue, Kentucky

● *Variety in authors is what we are after. Starting with this—and particularly the next—issue, Amazing will be bringing you famous veteran writers along with spectacular newcomers. Hope you like.*

Dear Editor:

I've been reading science fiction for about ten years and have seen some pretty good s-f movies in that time too. I think it's about time that science fiction found a regular place on TV. I don't mean the childish "Space Cadets" type of show either. If your readers would each write one letter to CBS or NBC or both asking them for this

type of show based on the kind of good adult stories that appear in *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, I'm sure that they would cooperate.

Your company could furnish much of the material from some of your old issues. It's bound to increase interest in s-f. What do you and your readers think of this idea?

Donald Gill
43 Talcott St.
Springfield, Mass.

● *It's interesting that you raise this point, Don. Earlier this television season a lot of networks and producers were making big noises about bringing out good s-f programs. But I guess they got scared at the last minute, and all the promising plans died—shot down, no doubt, by the six-shooters of all those pesky Westerns. Maybe next year we'll see something.*

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the November issue. I liked everything in it including the novel. About the novel, I have only one objection, and that is that it's really too short to deserve the name. It is more the size of a novelette. Also, one request, will you please ask the guy who writes the Johnny Mayhem stories to collect some of the old ones and have them published in a hardbound volume?

Kathleen Jeanne Owens
4102 S. Thompson
Tacoma 8, Wash.

● *Just to keep the record straight, Marian Zimmer Bradley's story, "The Planet Savers," was classified by us as a short novel. Normally our novels run 40,000 to 50,000 words—which is about the length of many hard-cover novels published these days for \$4 and \$5. Space is always the problem: Long novel, not enough room for all the other good stories.*

Dear Editor:

I would like to congratulate *Amazing* on the fine quality of the novels published in the last three issues, although I am sure the ones before them were excellent also. But I only became a fan of *Amazing* after reading "Gold In The Sky" which rates among the best s-f I have read in the last year.

William A. Cobb
RFD 3, Box 4
Clendenin, W. Va.

● *Thank you.*

Dear Editor:

I really liked that interplanetary cover on the December *Amazing*. It shows a welcome change, even if it still is Valigursky. Finlay's illo on pages 8 and 9 rated tops with me. Just think what an all Finlay ish would be like.

I've noticed that Henry Slesar has become pretty much of a regular in *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, so how about prying a novel from his typewriter? I don't think he's ever done a full-length one, and I imagine he could do quite a job on it.

Rog Phillips' "Unto the Nth Generation" was terrific. No matter how many times Rog tries, it seems impossible for him to write a bad story, as witness dozens of old *Amazings* and *Fantastics* from the late forties.

In the letter column Mr. Redden states that Phillips' "Jason's Secret" was "spectacular enough . . . can be interpreted into as many meanings as there are grains of sand on the beach." Looking it over, it seems to me that Rog meant to show just one incident in s-f and I don't think it holds that many meanings. Of course there are those who can find a hidden philosophical or psychological meaning in every story. But I don't believe "Jason's Secret" was that deep. Rog's purpose was to relate one event in the future, and he accomplished this purpose. But I don't think he went beyond that.

Michael Deckinger
85 Locust Avenue
Millburn, N. J.

● *Memo to Rog Phillips: How about it? Are you deep or not?*

Dear Editor:

I have been noticing all the excellent changes made in *Amazing* all during the ages, and none have pleased me more than when the pocket-sized period started printing such fine novels as "The Planet Savers," "The Sign of the Tiger," and now "The Big Count-Down" by Charles Eric Maine whose style I always like.

I am really pleased with these new novels and, as always, I await further improvements in the future.

James W. Ayers
609 First Street
Attalla, Ala.

● *Glad you like what we are trying to do with the magazine. Hope you keep on liking the improvements we will be making in future issues.*

AMAZING
STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

HUNTERS OUT OF TIME

By JOSEPH E. KELLEAM

ILLUSTRATOR SCHOENHERR

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE



On the beach the dwarfs slashed fiercely at the
that came out of the deep



blood-curdling monstrosities
to attack them.

IT WAS only a dream, he thought. A bubble rising up from memories of the past. Doctor Jack Odin half-opened one eye, glanced at the bedroom window where a gray October morning was breaking. Then he closed his eyes again and tried to go back to sleep.

What was the dream? Maybe he could pick it up again. There was something about it that made him recall those bright days when he was a boy; and his father, home from work, would take him on his knee and read such delightful, glittering poems and stories in a deep, magical voice that the little boy thought was beyond compare. Still, there was something troubling about the dream.

He had been visited by a strange little man, dressed a bit like Robin Hood, wearing a peaked red cap into which a single white feather had been thrust jauntily.

Then he remembered the poem that he and his father had loved:

*"Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Tramping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather."**

So that was it. A few lines of a poem. Lost out of time and

*The Fairies by William Allingham.

looking in vain for the little boy who had chanted them at play. Then Dr. Jack Odin opened both eyes with a start, remembering that there was a shadow at the window.

Throwing his cover aside, he leaped out of bed, glad that he had a prowler to break the awful boredom that had enveloped him these past months.

But the prowler appeared to be more startled than Odin. His head and shoulders were showing above the window sill. He wore a tight-fitting, laced jacket, and on his head was a scarlet, peaked cap into which one white feather was thrust at a jaunty angle. His pointed chin and wide-apart eyes gave him a gnomish look, although the wide shoulders and strong, gnarled hands by which he was clinging easily to a second-story window dispersed any idea of fragility.

As Jack started out of bed the little man's eyes opened wide and he lowered himself from sight. Jack thought he could hear him clambering down the drain-pipe. Rushing to the window he caught a glimpse of a tiny figure, not over four feet high, that ran across the misty lawn and dived into the shadows of a hedge.

Well, there was no use trying to sleep now. He smoked a couple of cigarettes, bathed and dressed, and went downstairs for breakfast.

Mrs. Forgan, his father's old housekeeper, was in the kitchen.

Mr. Forgan was dozing by the stove. Of late he moved from place to place, as his wife directed, and then promptly went to sleep.

Mrs. Forgan, who had practically reared Jack Odin, gave him a cheery good morning, and turned on the kitchen radio. Forgan opened one eye, blinked twice, and nodded.

A Washington announcer was giving the news: "—and this is the story of the murder of General Mathew, our Chief of Staff. His guest, a tall, lean, dark man, arrived at the General's house last night about nine o'clock. Apparently he had an appointment. The General's secretary let the visitor in and brought him to the General's study. The General closed the door after them. The study is sound-proof, and nothing was heard between then and midnight. At that time, the secretary became alarmed and called the butler. They crashed through the locked door to find the General stabbed to death. The visitor had fled through an open window. Evidently the General had defended himself with an old dagger which he always kept on his desk for a letter-opener. This blood-stained dagger was found near the General's body. Bloodstains were also found upon the window. The assailant, doubtless, was wounded. A taxi-driver has stated that he saw a man answering the visitor's description speeding toward the Baltimore Road. He thinks there were others in the

car—" And on and on. There had been little news lately. The announcer was making the most of it. Opinions of police officers, investigators, and Army officials were repeated. Mere theory, at this time, although a search of the General's private papers as well as a statement by his secretary hinted that the General, always a close-mouthed man, had been working on something big.

Breakfast over, Jack Odin went out into the old-fashioned yard which still boasted cast-iron hitching posts along the drive. But a thin, cold mist was falling, and after walking about the square-built, two-story house for a few minutes he returned to his study. As he closed the door to the front porch behind him, he could hear the sound of sirens screaming along the Baltimore Road. The hue and cry for the escaped killer was on. For a moment he felt a tinge of sympathy for the hunted man. In that long retreat from the Yalu he had known what it was to be cold, wounded—and hunted. The weary haunted feeling of having to run and keep running.

The day passed slowly. Just as Jack had spent so many days during the past year, he wandered from room to room, alternately listening to TV and the radio, thumbing through his books, then he wrote a couple of letters, and grew so moody that even his parents' old clock on the mantelpiece of his study

seemed to be striking off the seconds on an anvil.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the last bit of daylight faded from the windows. At supper Mrs. Forgan warned him: "Jack, you're mooning around too much. What you need is a wife. One of them frivolous, expensive ones. You're getting old before your time."

Pete Forgan raised one eyelid and his chin enough to grumble: "Yeah, boy, you're in a rut six feet deep. You need a wife, but not one of them ordinary ones. Get you a wife who's lively—and—uh—different." Then he fell asleep at the table and snored until Mrs. Forgan roused him and sent him off to bed.

Mrs. Forgan cleared the dishes away, puttered a bit around the kitchen, and soon followed her husband. Jack Odin retired to his study.

The big house was old. The tall sycamores were losing the last of their leaves as the first gusts of October tore across the old-fashioned grounds where four generations of Odins had played. The mist was sweeping away and a yellow moon was soaring across the sky as racks of clouds scudded before it. The leaves went rattling and scraping across the yard and fluttered against the old window screens and clung there shivering until the boisterous wind caught them and sent them dancing over the roof, sliding and skittering against the timeworn, uneven shingles.

Young Doctor Jack Odin stood at the window of his old-fashioned library and looked out at the thick clumps of shrubs and shadows. The moon sailed in and out of the clouds. The grounds had a mournful, graveyard look about them, and the rising wind was playing a dirge upon the emptying branches of the trees. It was a lonely night and a depressing one. The wind, sweeping so much of summer's splendor away, reminded him that it was not a pleasant thing to be the last of the Odins. A doctor, he was in a better position to analyze the feeling than most men. But it defied him. All day he had wandered morosely about the big barn of a house. It was a feeling that all was not well with him, that the Grey Spinners were taking up the threads of his life after allowing them to lie idle for over a year, and were toying with the faintest idea of a new pattern.

Still, he was in no mood for medicine or analysis either. All that day he had been wondering why he, a Golden Gloves and fencing champion, had spent eight hard years studying medicine and another four with the United States Air Force to prove to himself that as far as he was concerned his chosen profession was dull. Toward the end of the Korean affair he had seen enough proof of what a burp-gun can do to leave no illusion of glamor or excitement to war. His uniform had been hanging in a

closet upstairs for over a year and he had forgotten to put mothballs in its pockets.

Turning away from the window he selected a book at random and sat down at an old ebony table which had been his father's delight. After adjusting a reading lamp he turned the pages slowly, not reading a word, wondering what life was all about and what in thunder he was going to do with his own. Fortunately, he thought, there was a great deal of money to his account in banks in the District and Baltimore. Finding a job was not a necessity.

There was a saying in the neighborhood that the Odin luck was either very good or very bad. Jack Odin's family could trace itself no farther back than to old Simon Odin who had tired of being a peddler in Baltimore and made a comfortable fortune by operating a way-station in the Underground Railway. While his descendants were proud of him, they had to admit that Old Simon had certainly not conducted his business for purely humanitarian purposes. The old man had built this big comfortable house not far from Belin and spent his closing years on various commissions in Washington. It became a tradition in the family that the men served the government in one way or another, though none had risen any higher than an assistant-secretaryship. While the Odins claimed Maryland as their home, they were more closely associat-

ed with the District. One Odin had been an aide to General Lew Wallace and a distant relative had died with Custer, but all in all they had been a prosaic lot, serving various departments faithfully but not brilliantly. Always managing to add a bit to Old Simon's fortune. Honest, in their way, faithful, but—Young Doctor Jack Odin had to admit—shrewd as any peddler.

His mother had died when he was three. Jack's father, the last of the old-line Odins, died a month before the Korean affair was over. After his hitch with the Air Force, Dr. Odin came back to his home to moss over. A hundred year old trust firm settled the estate so capably that he had spent little more than ten minutes time with it.

So for the past year, he had dawdled about the house, now and then looking at his diploma. In the past month he had spoken to no one save the Forgans.

Tired of the book, Jack Odin opened the table drawer and got out some stationery and a pen. He had been putting off a letter to an old Air Force acquaintance in Kansas for two months. He scribbled for a time, listening to the morning wind. Finally he tore up the page in disgust. Taking up a fresh sheet he began scrawling and drawing upon it. Scarcely thinking, he wrote down any words and phrases that came to his mind. It was a trick of relaxation that he had learned while in uniform.

But, suddenly, his mind came

awake again. There, in the middle of the page, he had written the same phrase that had come to him when first awaking that morning:

"White Owl Feather—"

Damn, he thought to himself, doctors can get more neurotic than their patients if they don't watch out. There was no sense in saying that the words had no significance, but the question was this: Had he dreamed about White Owl Feather?

A little man with a white feather in his cap. Doctor Jack Odin could not make up his mind whether he had dreamed the whole affair or whether some screw had worked loose in his brain. He had a fair knowledge of psychiatry. Sometimes a forgotten memory could raise the very devil with a lonely man. All day long the poem that had been a favorite of his childhood had kept singing in his head:

*"Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Tramping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather."*

He threw his pen across the room. "Another month of this loafing and I'll be afraid of my shadow. Hang it all, I'll re-enlist tomorrow."

Then Jack looked up at the

window and there they were. Three of them. Three little men with wide eyes, pointed chins and ears. Each of them wore a Robin Hood's cap and in each cap was a feather. White Owl Feather, his visitor of the morning, was in the center. All three had an owlish look and they were staring at him—not in fear, but as though they were appraising him.

As he stared back they slowly moved away from the window. They spoke a few words to each other in a language he had never heard.

He thought he heard other voices. One, he fancied, was a woman's. Low and musical, with just a breath of fear hovering over the syllables.

There were steps upon the front porch and a low, insistent rapping at the door. Wondering and still bewildered by the turn that the night was taking, he went through the house to the living room, turned on the lights and opened the door.

Without further invitation they came in. First, a grotesque broad-shouldered little man carrying one end of a stretcher. Then the stretcher itself. Upon it and nearly covered by a dirty quilt was a long thin man. He was young. His face was dark and his eyes were closed. Had he not suddenly moved in pain Jack Odin might have thought him dead. White Owl Feather was carrying the other end of the stretcher. Behind him came

the third little man, the least of all, white-haired and stooped, not over three feet high, his face lined with worry and something else—was it compassion, pity, or contempt? Odin could not tell.

And last came the girl. Nearly five-feet-five, bareheaded and sandalled, her black curly hair sparkling with a few silver drops of mist. Thin and lithe, she stood at the door, looking at him with inquisitive, golden eyes. Clad in a tight-fitting scarlet robe that was belted with a white sash, she stood straight and proud. There in the night, her breasts high and full, she looked to Jack Odin like a queen who might have stepped down from the pictured wall of some Pharaoh's tomb. Or, and this was a better comparison, a goddess of those strange people of Crete, come back to look at the world with wonder in her golden eyes, and to take up life where Crete and her far-flung galleys had left it so long ago.

She seemed to be the spokesman for the odd group. The little white-haired gnome closed the door behind them. The three dwarfs looked at the girl and waited. She hesitated, studying Odin's face, her mouth pursed, a thin little line of concentration forming itself across her high forehead. As though she was trying to shape her words carefully in a language that she did not altogether understand.

The dark, thin man upon the stretcher moved in pain and a groan escaped from his set jaws.

Then she spoke. There was the faintest trace of an accent in her voice. Still, it was musical and not hesitant at all.

"You are a doctor?" she asked.

"Not a practicing one, Miss. I was more of a soldier than a doctor. Now I have given up both professions. This man needs attention. Judging from the color of his face and all the blood on the quilt I would say he needs a transfusion. I recommend a hospital—"

"There is no time for what you call a hospital. He is strong. Also, something of a fool. Foolish and strong enough to live. He has been stabbed in the chest. I myself could stop the blood if I had the proper instruments."

The one Jack Odin had called White Owl Feather shuffled his feet and spoke a few words to the girl in the same language that Odin had heard from his study.

She answered with one sharp syllable. Plainly, it meant "Quiet" or even "Shut up."

"What did he say?" Odin inquired.

"He says you are a man who is not sure of himself. Like a man who stands at a crossroads and hopes that the wind will turn him one way or the other, for he cannot make up his mind which way to go."

Odin laughed. "Then he is something of a psychologist. For I am that man. Still, I don't like to be reminded of such by uninvited guests. Suppose I tell the

five of you to get the hell out of here?"

Golden eyes flashed. The dark, regal head went even higher. He expected her to stamp her feet. But she stood tall and still, except for the rising and falling of her high breasts beneath the tight robe of silky scarlet.

"He is more than a psychologist. All the Neeblings have insight into the hearts of men. Still, even I can tell that you are wavering like smoke in the wind. Are you a coward? A man who has been both a soldier and a doctor should be able to stop the blood. This one is still bleeding. In time—"

With a faint shrug of her bare shoulders she rested her case.

"But I have no license to practice medicine in this state. You see, I went straight from medical school into the Air Force—"

"Foolishness," she answered scornfully. "One is either a doctor or one isn't. This thing called 'a license' I don't understand." And she added a few words in her own language that made the three dwarfs smile.

Oh well, Jack Odin thought, the decision would have to be his. Why waste words arguing with this strange girl. Anyway, there was something exciting about the five—something exhilarating about this girl. He laughed and caught himself. Odd! He could not remember when he had laughed. The Korean War, the indecision

about his profession, the loss of his father who had been such a pal in the old days, all these had stolen the laughter from him.

"Take him into my study there. You'll find a long table. Throw the books on the floor and put him on it. I'll find my bags and get some hot water."

Thirty minutes later Doctor Jack Odin looked up from his patient and nodded to the four onlookers with an unprofessional air. "He'll do," he said—and hoped that he was right.

The lean, dark man lay upon the table with jaws clenched. Only once had he opened his eyes while Odin was at work. Then he had given the doctor one dark scowl, filled with venomous hatred, and had spoken a few words in that strange language. Odin hadn't the slightest idea what the man was saying, but he knew he was cursing him. He had already developed a distaste for the whole business and a hearty dislike for the patient. He had a knife wound, he guessed. A nasty gash which ran almost from the left shoulder, zig-zagging down across the chest and ending in the splintered lower rib on the right side which had stopped the force of the blow. No accident this, Odin thought. A knife—probably a dull knife wielded by a powerful man.

Anyway, the lean man had guts. Not a sound from him, hardly a wince of pain though Odin must have hurt him plenty.

The girl and the three owlsh dwarfs stared at him. Good God, Odin thought, after all I've done for this crew they're looking at me as though I was the sorriest bungler.

It was true. For all her regal look the girl's eyes held a bit of sympathy—for Odin, not the patient. And the dwarfs wore a doubtful expression as though they were wondering if they had not come to the wrong place.

"I still think he needs a transfusion," Odin advised. Then he added cautiously: "This will leave a bad scar, you know."

She brushed a black curl from her high forehead. "Serves him right. Jul, see what you can do."

The smallest, oldest dwarf came forward and placed his fingertips on the lean man's forehead, then slowly drew them back across the temples to the nape of the neck. Again and again. And all the while the bent little man was whispering a low-voiced chant that had a soothing, calming sound in its repeated syllables.

Odin had not realized how old the little man was. His hair which brushed his shoulders was white. His face had the white fragility about it of very old china. His eyes, the palest blue, peered from under bushy white eyebrows with an intense, far-sighted stare as though they had seen too much. And yet, in that same stare was a mingling of both compassion and indifference.

Odin turned his gaze from the

old man to the two others. White Feather was nearly a foot taller, with muscular arms and shoulders. Both men wore green short-sleeved jackets which were tight-fitting and laced across the front.

The third dwarf was the largest of the three. He stood nearly an inch short of five feet. But while the old man had that look of porcelain fragility and White Owl Feather had an elfin air about him, the last of the three was muscled like a wrestler. His measurement around the shoulders must have been as much as his height. He wore a single red feather in his cap. His chest seemed to be bursting from the tight jacket, and his waist, belted and buckled with a two-inch square of gold, was remarkably small. His powerful, long arms matched the big chest and shoulders. His chin was not so pointed as his fellows, and his broad face was stolid and strong. In spite of his height, he had the look of a fighting man. One who would not anger easily, but after beginning a charge would not stop until he reached his goal.

The girl saw Odin studying the broad-shouldered dwarf. "He is called Gunnar," she told him. "You have heard the name of Jul. The middle one is White Owl. I am called Maya." She sighed. "It has been a long night. We had better go now. Thanks to you, Doctor. I do not know your name. In my country a host usually introduces himself."

Odin flushed. The girl scored

hard when she struck. "The name is Odin. Doctor Jack Odin, if you wish. Or Captain Jack Odin. It does not matter. Besides, I am not your host remember. You invited yourselves. I wish you hadn't—"

One look at the lithe brunette before him assured him that he was lying. This night was worth a score of those he had lately seen.

Far away a siren screamed and faded into the east.

Jul was growing uneasy. He and the girl fell to talking excitedly in that strange language of theirs which to Odin seemed both alien and familiar.

"We will go now." She turned to Odin. "I will not offer you money, though it seems to be the ruling custom in this country. Our thanks to you, Jack Odin. He," she swept her hand toward Jul, "wants you to accept something. He says that no good will come of this night. He says it will keep us from forgetting you when you are in trouble. We should be able to remember you for yourself, I am thinking. Still, his token is worth much. It would take the rest of the night for me to tell you how much it is worth—"

Jack Odin was thinking that he could think of no better way to spend the rest of the night than to listen to this exotic girl. The way she held her head high, the way she shrugged her shoulders, the way she tossed her dark curls—

As though sensing his thoughts she paused and looked down at her sandals. "You must believe me. If trouble comes, and Jul says it will, you must keep the token."

At this moment the old man took a gleaming object from beneath his jacket and handed it to Odin without further ceremony.

Odin turned the token over in his hand. It was a key of ivory, about four inches long, deeply slotted. Each slot was inlaid with red jewels—rubies, he wondered, though he knew little about precious stones.

He turned it over in his hands for a second, then thrust it into his pocket and bowed to the old man.

From the stretcher came a yowl of protest. Almost like the screech of a hurt cat.

The patient, his dark face tinged with blue, was trying to lift himself to his elbows. From his narrow, bloodless lips came a torrent of words. Cursing and protesting he tried to get to his feet.

Then Jul thrust him down and began that curious stroking from temple to nape, crooning softly all the while. In less than a minute the patient collapsed weakly. In another minute he was asleep.

Jul motioned. The two larger men took up the stretcher. The largest, Gunnar, gave Odin a friendly smile. The girl thanked him once more.

Then, as shadowy as when

they entered, they went out to the front porch, whispered to each other, and vanished into the night.

Jack Odin cleaned up the room and had another try at his letter. It was no use. An olive-skinned girl kept peering at him from the page. Her dark eyes laughing and filled with wonder, her black curls sparkling with a few drops of mist—

He was sitting there an hour later, with scarcely a line written, when the next interruption came.

Heavy feet were upon the front porch. There was a loud knocking at the door.

He opened it again. Six men were there: an Army officer, two highway patrolmen, and three men in street clothes who showed their badges.

"Your name, sir?" asked the officer.

"None of your damned business," Odin told him, for it was late and he didn't like the man's face nor tone.

"Your name!" It was an order.

"Doctor Jack Odin," the doctor shrugged. "Now, what's this all about?"

"Arrest, sir. Doctor Odin, you are under arrest for aiding and harboring the murderer of our Chief of Staff."

CHAPTER 2

IT WAS two months before Doctor Jack Odin returned to his home.

Christmas was nearing and the Star of the East was already shining in the sky as he got out of his car and looked up at the big, shadowy house. He shivered. Since men had first gone a-wandering, when had there been a more miserable home-coming?

Piles of leaves lay upon the walks. They complained beneath his feet as he stepped upon the porch.

Finding a key he opened the front door, turned on the light, and went in. Without thinking he locked the door behind him and dropped the key into his pocket. He shivered again. Two months ago—or two ages ago, depending on how you counted time—there had been another key, a larger key of ivory given to him by a breath-taking girl with golden eyes. Or had he dreamed of such a girl? Upstairs, in his bedroom, was the key. The only evidence of his sanity. The girl had not come forward. No one had ever admitted seeing her or the dwarfs. Many had sworn to the reality of the dark, wounded man. The dead General's secretary, the taxi-driver, and a tramp who had been on the Baltimore Road that night. The tramp had seen a car with the dark man slumped at the wheel. It had pulled slowly off the road and had headed toward Odin's house. But the man had never sworn positively that there was anyone else in the car. "I think there was—a smaller person—maybe a woman—maybe some other people—"

Even the Forgans had to admit under oath that they had heard nor seen no one on that unlucky night.

A few days before his release, Odin had sent word to his banker to have the house cleaned. Someone had done the job well, but the smell of years and dust, of old treasured things that had outlived their day and their masters, still clung to the rooms.

For a moment he wished that the Forgans were here. But he had arranged a pension for them, and they were now in Phoenix where Pete Forgan's rheumatism was doing better. So there was nothing left to do but walk alone.

The house-cleaner had stacked a few old newspapers upon an end table. After lighting the floor furnace, Odin sat down and looked at the headlines. Like trying to re-live a nightmare, he thought wryly.

His name was everywhere upon the front page. "ODIN ACQUITTAL PREDICTED," was the glaring headline. And near the center of the page the editor had prepared an editorial:

Doctor Mudd

Have we advanced since 1865? Will there be another Doctor Mudd? Mudd, as most readers know, was the innocent doctor who patched up Wilkes Booth. Because he performed a duty to an injured man, as any faithful doctor would do,

Doctor Mudd was hauled off to Washington, given a mock trial and sentenced to Shark Island during that period of insanity which immediately followed the death of Lincoln. Now, another doctor is hauled off to Washington to stand trial before a Federal judge. Let us hope that we have advanced. There is nothing to link Doctor Odin with the death of General Mathew. The murderer was traced to Odin's house. There he was treated and disappeared. He has not since been seen. Odin tells a strange, almost unbelievable tale. No one has seen his golden girl or the dwarfs. If Odin is shielding a beautiful girl, as his accusers say, they should make every effort to find her. They should also find the murderer, whether he be a madman, anarchist, or Red. Let us have no more of this idiotic show, where a little-known doctor with an excellent war record is being made the scapegoat. No! We have had enough. Doctor Mudd will go free.

With a sigh Jack Odin let the paper drop to the floor. That editor had been friendly enough. Still, Odin had a feeling that his defenders had nearly ruined him. Things had taken a turn in those past months which had placed him in a glaring light. He was either guilty or else he was

the world's prize chump. Well, the editor had predicted correctly. He had been freed. The chump had been exonerated and proved to be a first-class chump indeed.

"Oh, hell," said Jack Odin. He got to his feet and began pacing about the room. Disgraced, embittered, and lonely. Good heavens, what could a pair of golden eyes do for a man. Eight years of study and four years of faithful service to the Air Force—faithful, maybe, certainly not excellent as the editor had insisted—all had gone down the drain. Golden eyes. Golden girl. Bah! He kicked the fallen paper into the farthest corner of the room.

Then there were steps upon the porch and voices. The voices he had heard once before. The strange language which was both alien and familiar. The same voices. He counted them. One, two, three, four. The fourth was a woman's. Low and musical, with just a breath of fear hovering over the syllables.

The footsteps and the voices stopped. There was a low, insistent rapping at the door.

He knew who was there. His first impulse was to dash out on the porch and kick all four of them into the yard. Then he discovered that he was as excited as a schoolboy, and was suddenly glad that the girl and her three dwarfs had returned. As he went to the door he cursed himself for a fool.

"Of all the idiots, Odin, you

win the prize. Jail-bait and trouble, that's all she is—"

But he opened the door and tried to appear as unconcerned as possible.

Maya was standing there, as straight and calm as before. Just as pretty too. She was bareheaded, though it was a cold night. A long red cloak was about her shoulders and pinned tightly at the throat. He bowed mockingly.

"Well, my friends. The battle is over, so you're here for your combat ribbons, no doubt."

She gave him a searching glance. The smile which had begun on bee-kissed lips faded away. She stepped into the room with a queenly air. The three dwarfs followed, looking much the same as they had before except that dark, woolen capes were thrown over their shoulders and the oldest, Jul, was wearing a red toboggan with a fluffy tassel that bobbed about as he walked. The other two, Gunnar and White Owl, saluted him quietly.

Still in a bad humor, Jack Odin closed the door and rubbed his hands together. "Well, well," he said, trying to be as sardonic as possible. "Here we are. Where have you been, may I ask, and what did you do with our patient—the murdering scum? You know, I'm not proud of that night's work."

"Please, Doctor." She acted as though she were getting ready to apologize and did not quite know what to say.

"Forget the 'doctor'," he said coldly. "Some gentlemen in Baltimore are deliberating this week as to whether or not I am worthy of that title—"

She did stamp her foot this time. "Oh," she sputtered, biting her lower lip in vexation, "Why are you so bothered? Oh—how do you say it—Fiddlesticks."

That made him madder than ever. "Fiddlesticks, is it? After what I've been through. I ought to punch these little guys in the nose and take you across my knee and paddle the living daylight out of you."

She laughed. "I doubt if Gunnar would let you. I have known him to fell a bull with one blow of his fist."

This time, apparently, it was Gunnar's time to tell her to be quiet. He had been looking at Odin with a gleam of sympathy on his broad face.

The strong man's quiet dignity prompted Odin to set a better example.

"Well, there's no need of us standing here arguing. Sit down, all of you. I'm sorry I can't offer any refreshments. I just arrived, myself. In fact, I haven't been out of jail very long."

She removed a scarab clasp from her cape and threw the garment aside. Then she sat down in his favorite chair and smiled up at him. He noticed that instead of the sandals she now wore galoshes of red leather

which were topped at the ankle by an inch of white fur.

"I'm sorry," she said. Then she laughed. It was a tinkly laugh, good-humored and honest. At the same time it irritated him.

"What's so funny?" Odin demanded.

"I am continually amazed at your race," she answered. There was a little smile of contempt hovering over her lips. "For nearly three months I have dodged in and out of your clumsy world and it is not to my liking. The people." A beautiful shoulder nearly touched the brushing black curls as she shrugged. "They are impossible. Why do all of you try to be alike? Is it—what you call a propaganda medium instilled in you? Or is it nature's way of finally creating a host of dull, uninteresting people from the same mold. Now, Jack Odin, in our own, thoughtless way we have put you on what you call a spot. But I do not see that we have done such a terrible thing. You have offended the common thinking. Bah! Everywhere, I see people grimly pursuing what they call security. They do not appear exceedingly happy—and most of them are burdened down with what you call debts. Ugh."

The "ugh" made him boil again. "My race?" he questioned. "Dodging in and out of my world! Perhaps you have disowned us all, Milady?"

She smiled again and looked down at her red shoes. "Now, I have hurt your feelings again. But it is not my world and it is certainly not my race. For twenty-five thousand years and more the Brons have not taken the slightest interest in any of you."

"Your complex is showing now, eh? Well, what is wrong with our tendency to conform. Would you have a bunch of murderers sneaking around in the night? Stabbing people and getting stabbed? Then asking a bystander to patch you up so you can run away? By—uh, thunder—you're talking like we are a host of microbes creeping along on the withered skin of a half-rotten apple."

Her eyes met his, wavered, and she looked down at her red shoes again. "I am sorry. I have offended you. In my land people do as they please as long as they don't annoy anyone. If they annoy another they soon get hurt. But if a man decides to go out and choke a tiger to death with his bare hands, we let him go. It may be a foolish thing to try, but it is his own affair."

"And where is this wonderful world of yours? You don't make it sound very inviting—" Odin remarked.

"I was using an extreme example. It would take a long time to explain my world to you. Anyway, we are here to take you there."

"Me! Such crust! Now, where is the freedom you were talking

about? Perhaps I don't give a whoop about seeing your world?" But Odin knew he was only blustering. Seeing any world with this exotic girl of the golden eyes appeared to be an excellent idea.

As though she sensed his thoughts, she drew her head up sharply and flung a black curl away from her forehead.

"We have come because we owe you a debt. We have made things impossible for you in what appears to be an impossible world."

"Well," Odin admitted, "it isn't exactly a world of my own making. But I've grown up a bit in the last two months. Which probably means that I'm less gullible and less admirable. Now, tell me, did you come here to help me—or is there some other reason?"

Maya was even quite pretty when she frowned. "You are making things difficult. And you are getting ready to misunderstand. But there is also the key."

He laughed. "Now, we are uncovering the truth—"

With a little bound Maya was on her feet, golden eyes blazing. "You do not know how you were honored when we gave you that key. The key is a symbol of our lives. It belongs in our world. It and its owner. But you and the key can stay here—if that is the way you wish it. Jul, Gunnar, let us go."

So far, the dwarfs had kept still. Now, Gunnar came across

the room. His swinging gait made him appear even shorter. His shoulders so much wider than Odin's, were frightening.

Gunnar smiled. "This man has done some fighting in his day. You have talked to him like he was a carl." He held out a broad hand. "What we do is in the skeins of the Spinners. But you were welcome to go with us, soldier. Right welcome. As for the key, it is of little value. It has become a symbol—but, also, it has not been used. I am sorry for my part in that night's work—and I wish you well." With that he thrust his hand into Odin's.

Jack Odin took the proffered hand—and gripped back so hard that a grin of respect came to the dwarf's broad face. Jack Odin laughed. "Now, there's an invitation I can accept. We'll look at this world of yours. And I'll take the key along. Lord, there are plenty of doors which need opening. And there are too many locks without any keys."

"Then you will go?" Maya asked archly, and Jack Odin found himself fancying that she had not only wanted him to go, but had counted on his going all along.

"All the way," Odin told her, and laughed again as he quoted: "Up the Airy mountain, down the rushy glen—"

Maya and the dwarfs looked at each other in puzzled fashion. Then Old Jul spoke. "I think this is a man worthy of his name. He fashions him a farewell song.

Eh, lad, were you ever a minnesinger?"

"Faith, no, old man, all the minnesingers are dead. My age had no use for them. You may have noticed that ours is one of those dreary stretches in time which is dedicated to only two things: The mediocre average and a sort of scientific barbarism."

Jul's back was bent and his white locks fell across his thin shoulders. But there was something about his face and his lofty brow that bespoke much learning and much thinking. His face, which was as pale and translucent as fine china, was seamed in thought. Then Jul asked: "I have heard that they crucified those they did not like. Were the minnesingers crucified?"

Odin was in a bitter mood. "And would they waste good oak? No old man, they laughed them off the stage and starved 'em to death."

Maya's lips began to pout at the delay. "Are you going to stay here while the night wastes away? Surely, you two don't have time to number the ills of this miserable land?"

"Or its good points, either." Jack flung himself to the rescue.

Again, the shiny, black curls tossed commandingly. "It has no good points. If you are going, Jack Odin, I suggest that we be on our way."

A few minutes later, when Odin came down the stairs with

the ivory and ruby key in one hand and a small overnight kit under his arm, they were growing impatient.

He looked about him. The old house was calling to him. All the things that were his and his mother's and father's before him were clamoring against being forsaken. He looked about him, trying to choose some souvenir to take along, but there were so many things that were dear to him.

Seeing his thoughts, Old Jul counseled, "There are but three things that a man can bring with him from the past: A dream, a memory, and a brave heart."

So Jack Odin let his companions out upon the porch and took one last look about him. It was one of those breathless, brutal moments when the hands of the clock swing down like flashing knives and sever the past from a man, so that he can say from then on: "Here, for good or bad, one chapter of my life ended and a new chapter began."

With a steady hand he turned out the light. Then he turned the knob and stepped out on the porch and closed the door softly behind him. The four were waiting in the yard. Above them the stars looked down with friendly eyes, winking occasionally to cheer them on.

Maya was driving. It was nearly midnight. Some sort of homing instinct seemed to guide her. Jack hadn't the slightest idea where they were. They had

headed south, then west, then south again. Since the trial he had been bothered by headaches, and now one was coming on. It throbbed at his right temple until at last he groaned in pain. He was sitting between Jul and White Owl who had not spoken a word. Maya and Gunnar were in the front seat of the car, which was a cheap sedan about four years old, he judged.

"Tired?" Old Jul asked quietly.

"Yes, and a damnable headache too."

"Here." In the dark Odin could feel the old man's frail fingers feeling across the nape of his neck. They fluttered and kneaded, just as they had felt their way across the neck of the injured man that night when Odin had risked his diploma. It was a soothing, calming feeling. Not only were the nerves quieted, but Odin felt a sense of strength and well-being flooding through him as though the old man's small, knobby fingers were a connection to the vast surge of power leashed down deep in the earth. Just as he went to sleep, Odin had an odd feeling that he was a part of everything—the rocks and the trees, the birds and the birdsong, the teeming earth and the barren desert—living things and groping things—and he wondered how men could fight and wish each other ill when they were no more than sparks in that great flaming fountain which was leaping up into the dark sky

in the distance. The fountain flamed higher, drew closer until he was in the very core of it, a spark flashing and swirling joyously with billions of other sparks—

And he slept.

It was high noon when he awoke. He was all alone in the back seat of the car which was parked in a thicket of scrubby oaks that still held to their dead leaves. The leaves were rattling against the barest trace of a wind. The sky was blue and the sunshine was warm, coming through the rolled-up windows. He looked about him. The leaves and the brown grass showed clearly that it was the same season of the year, but he must have traveled far to the southwest since leaving home.

He got out of the car, feeling strangely elated. No more despair or dejection was left. He was stronger. All the worries and the fear of disgrace that had plagued him were gone. Remembering a wild dream of a fountain of sparks rushing up the sky, those old troubles seemed trivial.

Then Odin heard a clang of steel against steel, and walking around a little knoll he saw Maya and the dwarfs active at something.

A cylinder of steel, about ten feet in diameter had recently thrust itself up through the reddish earth, so that it lay like the crest of a volcano at the top of a pyramid of rocks and clay. The

four were busily shoveling earth away from it.

"Good morning," he called cheerfully as he walked toward them.

Maya put down her shovel and came to meet him. "Awake at last." She smiled. "My, they must have had you beat. I didn't realize you were so far gone. Do you know how long you slept, Dr. Odin?"

"Well, it's morning. About twelve hours," he guessed.

"And another morning. You slept for thirty-six hours, Jack Odin, while we drove to this place and worked after we got here."

He whistled his unbelief. "And what are you doing here? And what is that odd contraption you're digging up?"

"We're not digging it up. It has lain here at the center of a little hillock for ages—"

"Nonsense. It isn't rusty."

"You don't believe anything, Jack Odin. Now, I will tell you the truth. This is something like what you call an elevator. It goes far down into the earth—to the land of Opal where my people and the dwarfs have lived these thousands of years. Long ago my people used it for making expeditions to the face of the earth—but the trips were wearisome and unprofitable. It was abandoned, and the ages piled this heap upon the shaft. Only a few hours ago, we called for it and it thrust its way up. As soon as we clear the debris away

and reach the door, we will be ready for our journey."

"Called it? Maya, you use some of the oddest expressions."

Maya stamped her foot. "Now, you are being stupid. We have a black box to control the machinery from miles away. Just as you can direct a rocket."

"Oh, I see. Wait a minute! You just said this thing was ages old. No machinery would last—"

It was her time to be scornful. "Nonsense. Our ancestors made machinery to last. Of course, we have used the machines so little. We found we had small need for them. Until lately—"

"Maya, here's the door," Gunnar called out. Jack Odin and the girl walked over to the excavation. The three dwarfs, even old Jul, were working furiously, throwing big shovelfuls of earth and gravel behind them. Jack marveled at their strength.

Soon an open shaft was made in the conical pile of debris about the base of the steel cone.

"It's clear, now," Gunnar cried out. The three came out of the shaft like gnomes.

Maya took up a small box which reminded Odin of an old-fashioned radio and started dialing.

There was a ghost of a squeak of metal against metal, and a convex door swung open in the side of the cylinder.

White Owl appeared to be the demolition squad for the group. He immediately got busy with some sticks of dynamite, buried

them in the sides of the shaft and made some long fuses ready.

Gunnar was sweating. "Now, let's get out of here. I don't like it, Maya, never did. The whole trip has been a goose-chase, and we have found but one man to our liking."

"We—or Maya?" asked White Owl solemnly and winked at Jack.

"Indeed, we will go," Maya answered haughtily. "Someone may find a car they can use. Set the fuses, White Owl."

They crowded into the elevator. Control panels filled the circular sides of the little room. Odin looked about him in wonder.

Meanwhile, White Owl had lit the fuses and came scrambling into the elevator. Maya and Gunnar busied themselves with the controls. The door swung shut. Then the steel cylinder in which they were now sealed plummeted downward so swiftly that Odin nearly lost his breath. Above them came the muffled roar of the explosion that sealed the shaft once more.

The journey downward had begun.

CHAPTER 3

GUNNAR took some folding chairs from a compartment behind one of the panels and set them up for his companions. After that, White Owl and Jul nodded like commuters.

One feeble bulb illuminated the elevator. Gunnar kept sitting

down and getting up again to inspect the dials. Now and then the downward trip was halted or slowed while he and Maya set pressure regulators and oxygen gauges.

Once the light flickered strangely and Odin found himself wondering what would happen if their power was suddenly lost. Would they stop down here in the earth? Or would they go on down the shaft like a plummet? And how far had they gone? How deep down in the earth was this world that belonged to Maya and the dwarfs? He never got an answer to his questions. His friends dismissed them as of no importance. At one time he felt sure they were sliding downward at a forty-five degree angle, then the cylinder righted itself again and their descent was straight.

Finally Gunnar and Maya agreed that all was going well. While the heavy-shouldered little man sat with his eyes glued to the controls, Maya sat down by Jack Odin and brushed a moist curl from her forehead.

"Well, so far, Jack Odin. At least, you will start out in our world with a good name. Odin was a great hero to the dwarfs' ancestors. How did you come by that name?"

He shrugged. "How do we come by our names? Who can unriddle the past. You haven't answered the present riddle yet? In my time I've done some foolish things for some beautiful girls, but this is the first time I

ever gave up everything I had and followed a beautiful one into a steel cage which apparently is falling to the center of the earth."

Maya smiled. "Were those other beautiful girls as pretty as this one?" she asked carelessly.

"Well—no," he answered.

She sighed. "It is a mixed-up affair, isn't it? You deserve to hear the story, but I will try to make it as short as possible. To give you the entire history of the Brons and the Neeblings would take weeks. And, as you just said, who can unriddle the past? So Jack Odin, be as patient and quiet as possible and I will tell you of the Brons and the Neeblings and their world of Opal."

Once, long ago, (Maya began) there was another sun with other planets. The sun began to misbehave. It flamed out, and the innermost planet melted in fervid heat. Then the sun drew back, but it was unsteady after that, and the other planets were becoming unbearable.

This was the solar system of the Brons, for my people owned all the planets. They had been going from world to world for centuries, but they had not dared outer space between the suns. Nor, I suppose, did they care to. But now it became necessary that they design a new ship, if even a remnant should survive. Their sun had become unstable, and perhaps at the

next pulsation it would flame out into one vast nova and cinder all life that belonged to it—even the farthestmost, ice-bound hulk of a planet which was almost lost on the fringe of space.

So new ships were prepared. Ships far different than the rocket things your troubled race is dreaming about. How many ships, I do not know, but the tale tells that there was a great number. A swarm, each stored with power enough to explore a galaxy. Swift and self-supporting, these ships.

I can only tell you of what happened to one. One ship, at least, escaped that threatening doom and plunged out into the void between the suns. From far away it watched its own sun melt and run down the sky.

In the one ship were ten couples. And at last it reached this planet of yours. But not the score who started the journey. Their children or grandchildren, for they had kept the same number aboard. This happened twenty-five thousand years ago.

They found your world forbidding, but it did support life similar to their own. The continents were different then, and the living things were somewhat different. They explored your world from pole to pole, but they found nothing but savages. Think of it, Jack Odin, in that far-off day your people might have been taught to bridge the gap between the hunting-fire and atom-heat. But they would have nothing of the Brons. Wherever

my people went they were attacked by yelling savages, who were slaughtered in droves, but who kept coming back.

The Brons were considering a plan to make a part of the moon over into a grim but inhabitable land when they discovered the Neeblings. These people, as you may have guessed, are of Norse stock. They alone had flocks and smiths. But they were hated as much as the Brons. I think they were on the verge of extermination when they met us. The races of men have always hated anything that was different. And, as you can see, they are different from other men. Though they grazed their flocks in the pastures above ground they lived in caves by night. They, I am sure, are the Trolls and the Little People who have survived in your legends to this day. They knew the caves and the tunnels underground, the Neeblings. They had found a vast, dark hollow in the earth, far, far below. Though it was dark and forbidding, they had dreamed of living there away from their enemies. An impossible dream, at that time, but with the coming of the Brons it became reality. That forbidding bubble of blackness which they found finally became our beautiful world of Opal. We think it is the shell that was left when some moonlet hardened like a seed and was hurled forth into space just before the bubbling earth cooled into shape. At any rate, we and the Neeblings

bought that world and paid for it with nine generations of lives. It seems to be a law of the universe, Jack Odin, that nothing can be gained without full payment.

Opal, as you will soon discover, is an elliptical disc with sheer sides and an out-curved ceiling. Our ancestors dismantled their ship and moved it. Of their atomic power, they and the Neeblings built a tiny, artificial sun at the highest point of the ceiling, five miles above ground. They opened a passageway to the sea and let in water until all the land that was left was several peninsulas thrust out from the base of the cliffs. They brought in plants, insects, birds and animals—all that they could find, rejecting none, lest they lose some balance of nature. With the coming of the sea water came the living things of the sea. Then they closed that passageway, leaving a great door so they could have an escape route if it were needed.

Some of the things they brought there soon died. Others lived or changed to adjust themselves. So the land of Opal was built and paid for with the lives of the Brons and the Neeblings. And there we have lived all these centuries, not bothering the upper world except to listen in upon your quarrels and idiocies occasionally. Not bothered by you until of late.

Maya finished her story. She sighed and got up to help Gun-

nar with some of the controls. They were now sliding down an incline at a furious rate. Their momentum slowed. The capsule of steel eventually righted itself and, still slowing, resumed its vertical position once more.

Assured that Gunnar needed no more help, the girl came back to her chair.

"And that is our story, Jack Odin," she said quietly.

He had not interrupted. But already a throng of questions clamored for an answer. Assuming that Maya's story was true, and not a mere jumble of myths, what vistas into the past were opened? Then, suddenly, he realized that he had been swindled again. He had wanted to know the reason for the death of a respected general; instead, he had received a mere saga which purportedly came within twenty-five thousand years of the present.

"And is it?" he retorted scornfully. "Is it, indeed? It sounds more like moonshine. But where does it concern us? Why have you been skulking around up there like a passel of whipped dogs? Why was General Mathew killed? And what became of this devil who I patched up?"

Golden eyes flashed. Maya's chin held high, she blazed at him: "We do not skulk. Nor are we whipped dogs. Oh, we had hopes for you once. But when Atlantis went beneath the waves, there was nothing left but bar-

barians beating themselves over the heads with stone clubs. Only the hard-headed survived—as any fool can plainly see."

"So I made you mad, did I? Well, I'm plenty mad myself. It seems to me like you're one of those unfortunate individuals who have been educated from an over-edited history book. Now, tell me the truth about the swine who caused me all that trouble before I lose my temper and shake the spit out of you."

Maya was still blazing. "Gunnar would break you in two for that remark."

"He's got good shoulders and arms, I'll admit. But I've taken some who were taller. Besides, he looks to me like a guy who wouldn't fight without a sound reason. Oh, hell, I don't want to fight Gunnar. But you're as exasperating a female as I ever tangled with."

"Now, Doctor," she mocked. "Don't diagnose a case until you have spent at least a thousand dollars on clinical tests. You may, if I understand your profession, be able to give me a pill. A pill to wake a person up and a pill to put him asleep again. Good heavens, what a way to make a living!"

"It's an old and honorable profession. And now I am burned up. I am not a doctor any more. And you know why. Because I patched up that murdering scum you brought to my house. Such crust! And I suppose the people of your country cure themselves with dirt dauber's nests and

vinegar. Or do they hire witch doctors?"

"They don't get sick," she answered simply.

"Okay. Okay. Now, for the last time, will you tell me why you were skulk—wandering around the District and who was that character I patched up?"

Her eyes were no longer flashing. Maya appeared to be a bit ashamed of her remarks as she started up to help Gunnar.

Odin clutched her arm. "He needs no help— Now, the truth—"

Maya shook her arm free. Then, staring straight ahead, she answered, "His name is Grim Hagen. He is my cousin."

"Every family has at least one, I suppose."

"I do not like Grim Hagen. I am not excusing him. But in the world of Opal he is one of the highest-ranking five."

"He is! They must select them by playing bingo. And who are the others?"

"Jul is one," Maya answered. "I am another—"

Odin bowed. "Excuse me for what I just said, princess."

"You are laughing again. The fourth is the chief of the scientists."

"So these are your best, eh?" Odin felt like being scornful, for she had said too much against his world and his profession. "A girl, a murdering louse, a little old man, and a scientist who probably brews bat wing stew. Who's the fifth?"

Maya lifted one foot and studied it carefully.

"Who's the fifth?"

Maya flashed him a breath-taking smile and said: "You are."

"Me? Will you please be serious."

"I am," Maya protested. "The keys govern. There are five. Grim Hagen and I each heired one from our fathers. Jul, the patriarch of the Neeblings, has one according to a very old law. The chief scientist has another, but the scientists refuse to have anything to do with selecting the fifth. The owner of the fifth key is to be selected by three. He must be a good, honorable man, likely to put the general welfare above his own wishes. The holder of the fifth key had died shortly before we made the trip to your land. We kept his key with us, as the law required. Then, that night, with Grim Hagen not voting, Jul and I gave it to you. I told you it was a great honor—"

"Now, I'll try to be humble and thank you. But why?" asked Odin.

"It seemed to us that one of your race should sit in our councils. Things had got out of hand. Whether you liked it or not, your race had got too involved in our affairs. And we liked you better than any we had met."

"I am honored," Odin told her quietly, "but you must have met very few. And it is still a riddle to me."

"Our artificial sun," Maya ex-

plained, "is a regulated atomic fire. Different from your atom blasts, different from your isotopes. As benevolent as your own sun. So it would have stayed had you not begun your atomic blasts. With your first blast, it flickered. It has continued to flicker and wink out with every blast. Sometimes, a mere wink. At other times it has left us in pitch-dark for hours. It is not a mere burning of uranium particles. We are far below the earth's surface, but some of our energy comes from the sun itself. Out there in the depths of space my ancestors used the energy of the suns. Your atomic explosions come through, making something similar to what you call a short-circuit. Without our sun we would grope in the dark for a few weeks. Then we would die. Assuming that the last explosion that burned out our sun did not poison us with its rays."

"And you think I can help? Maya, my country is no longer the only one with atom bombs."

"I know. But Jul liked you—and I—well, I liked you too. Grim Hagen was violent when he recovered, but we do not take orders from Grim Hagen. Not yet. You see, our visit to Washington was to arrange a secret meeting with the Chief of Staff. Grim Hagen thought he could persuade the general, but as usual Grim lost his temper."

"But why didn't you go to the President?"

"Grim Hagen thought it best to see the Chief of Staff. Oh, I

don't know what was in Grim's mind. Jul and I let him persuade us."

Suddenly the deceleration of the elevator was breath-taking, weighting them down. Then Gunnar brought the steel cylinder to a stop with one last swoop that made Odin bob in his chair. Gunnar looked over his shoulder with a smile on his broad face. "Home again," he announced, and pulled a lever.

The elevator door opened and another one opened beyond.

To Jack Odin it was like seeing a framed picture of fairy land. Their door had opened in the face of a cliff, fully three hundred feet above the world below. A stairway of gold-flecked marble led downward to a plain. In the distance was a city with lofty spires and minarets. It glimmered beneath a tiny sun that was set into the very center of a turquoise bowl of sky. Glimmered was the word, for these towers seemed to be fashioned of rose marble and new ivory, of silver and gold, with here and there the very palest of robin's egg blue to add a breath of coolness. Beneath the city, and on the plain before and beyond, the gardens and forests were like emerald waves. The trees were mostly palm and giant fern, Jack Odin guessed, but the undergrowth must have been at least six feet high. Off in the distance was a sea, and above the opalescent water were billowing white clouds. The sea was mo-

tionless. The sky merged into a misty silver in the distance. The horizon was indistinct.

There was no welcoming party. The five walked out upon the steps. The air was warm and fresh and clean. Far below, song-birds were singing a chorus. Then Gunnar closed the two doors and they walked down to the plain. As they descended, Jack Odin saw a tiny white road which came out of the city and through the underbrush to meet them. He guessed that it was made of crushed shell, for it too glimmered in the sun.

They came to the road. Jack offered Maya his arm but she shook it away. She walked with a lithe, swinging gait, and the dwarfs, for all their short legs, kept up a trotting pace that made Odin step along.

Suddenly he had a feeling that something was following them. Once he was sure that he saw a shadow, half-way up the bole of a palm. And once he was sure he saw two eyes peering at him from a heavy clump of bushes. But there was a constant scurrying of feet, claws, and feelers out there. The birds and the treetoads were clamoring. Grasshoppers and katydids were at their old symphonies. He could not be sure that he heard any sound that could be separated from the steady drone, though he noticed that Gunnar watched the same side of the road.

Then, without warning, the sun flickered once and went out.

They were in stygian dark for

a moment. The birds and the insects had stopped their song. But off to one side, near the spot that Gunnar and Odin had been watching, came a horrible screaming.

Maya turned on her pocket torch and held it high. And just at that moment an ape-like thing came shuffling out of the dark. It screamed again as it rushed toward them.

With a war-cry of a Viking Gunnar turned aside to meet it, his long arms outspread.

They met. The thing was neither chimp, nor gorilla, nor orangutang, but somewhere in between. It kept on yammering as it advanced. The girl moved forward, holding her electric torch high, trying to blind it.

With a rush it was upon Gunnar. Ape-like hands clutched the dwarf's throat, and Gunnar embraced the thing. His long arms went under the brute's armpits. His hands came up and forward, locking themselves about that slanting forehead. For a moment they stood there, weaving, Gunnar holding the creature's teeth only a few inches from his throat. Then they slipped and fell.

"Here," Jul thrust the handle of a knife into Odin's hands. "Get him, Nors-king."

Without thinking of the title that had been thrust upon him, Odin leaped forward. The thing had fallen across Gunnar though the dwarf was still holding its head away from his throat and

slowly bending its neck back. Odin started to stab at the ribs, but the ape was struggling so violently that he feared he would hurt Gunnar. The thing had a fringe of coarse hair which ran from crown to nape. This he seized with one hand, and with Gunnar helping to hold the brute, Odin slashed its throat as neatly as any hog-killer.

Gunnar rolled clear of the fallen body and wiped its blood from his face.

"Eh," he said, and laughed a wild laugh. "So Odin comes back to the roots of Yggdrasil where time and men and life and space began. Now let the Norns take up the skeins. For at last we have a man on our side. And Nidhoggr the dragon shall tremble. Let the thunder roar and the lightning flash, for the anvil will shiver beneath the hammer. And the smith will leave nothing but good clean steel at the forge."

Then as suddenly as it had left them, the little sun flickered and came back to warm life. The insects and the birds took up their song.

Gunnar looked down at his bloody hands, wiped them upon his thighs with a guttural laugh, and held out his hand to Odin.

Odin transferred the dripping knife to his left hand, and gripped Gunnar's with all his strength.

Then Gunnar laughed and clasped Odin about the arm with his free hand. "Blood brothers, now. And I will fight beside you. Like a storm. Like a flame—"

Maya switched off her electric torch and put it back into its holster at her belt.

Her eyes had first narrowed at Gunnar's outburst. But now they were open and determined. "See, Jack Odin. This was but a touch of what we sometimes get. Imagine twenty-four hours of this—in a city, or on the beaches where the things come up from the deep?"

Jack wiped his forehead. "This was bad enough. Do you let these creatures run wild so near the city?"

"And why not?" she questioned. "The hunters must have their kill."

He bowed mockingly. "Princess, what an outlook."

Odin cleaned the knife on a broad leaf and returned it to Jul. Then they took up their march to the city, which gleamed brighter and towered higher as they approached.

CHAPTER 4

AS THEY went down the shell-topped road that ran between verdant walls of foliage, Jack Odin had a feeling that he was walking toward the center of a great shallow bowl. That feeling never left him altogether. As Maya had told him, the world of Opal was disc-shaped with sheer walls and an out-curved roof. The shallow sea, almost waveless, shimmered in the distance. The road, the jungle about it, and the town itself were a part of a peninsula that jutted

out from the wall. Indeed, he learned later, most of the habitable land of Opal was made up of peninsulas such as this. There were a few scattered islands, but they were small and of little consequence.

He watched the sea as they descended. It was not completely tideless, he judged, but it had a painted, glimmering look—like, well, like an opal. This world was rightly named. Strictly speaking, there was no horizon. Vision simply failed at a point where steam-banks were thickest. There were a few boats in the distance. They had neither sails, nor oars, nor funnels. No puffs of smoke were above them. Yet, they were moving—quietly, calmly. Far away was one tiny island little more than a shadow against the water, with one darkling cloud gathering above it. A few wedge-shaped flights of sea-birds were piercing their way through the sky. He watched one flight until it reached the vanishing point. At no time did the formation waver or change.

Then the road leveled off and the city was before them, hiding the sea from view. This was Maya's city—Valla she had called it—and with its domes, minarets, and spires, all blue and ivory and rose, with here and there a flash of silver and gold, it looked like a faery city lost out of elfland. Birds filled the sky above it, weaving their old, familiar patterns into the summery day. Odin had forgotten how to cry, but there was a lump

in his throat as he looked at the beauty spread out before him, as though something lost or something dreamed about long and long ago had suddenly reappeared. A pair of mocking birds were singing nearby, each one trying to build the brightest bubble of glittering notes upon the June-day air.

There were no slums hanging to the outskirts of this city. Valla, Maya told him, had a population of not over forty thousand. But each house and tower was built within the center of a city-block, with gardens and lawns and fences about it, so that Maya's city gave the appearance of being much larger than this.

Nor did their sudden appearance upon the sidewalks create any great interest. Even Odin's clothes did not attract much attention. A few children ran to the fences and called out to them. Odin heard the word "Maya" repeated often. The girl and the dwarfs answered the greetings, stopping occasionally to talk, and once White Owl left them to tell a joke to an old acquaintance, and came running to catch up, still laughing. He had been the glummost of the lot, Odin had thought, but now that he was home the little man was out of the doldrums.

Some dogs barked. A few strollers greeted them pleasantly, took a quick look at Odin and shrugged their shoulders. But the little party might as well

have been returning from an afternoon's fishing trip for all the welcome that was given them.

Odin had started out carrying his coat across his arm, but on Maya's and Gunnar's advice he had thrown it away. Maya and the dwarfs had left their winter clothes in the elevator, and had put on lighter wear and sandals. Odin was becoming uncomfortably warm as they neared the center of the town. There were more and more people on the street, and Maya stopped to talk several times while Odin perspired and mopped his face with a wet handkerchief, feeling as out of place here as he ever had in his life.

Then they came to a three-storied house of rose marble, set behind a low wall of white stone. Maya opened a gate and they went into a yard that was shining with flowers and well-kept shrubs. The gate closed behind them and she gave Odin a flashing smile.

"Well, this is home. We Brons like privacy, as you can tell. We respect it and we demand it."

They went across a columned porch which felt suddenly cool and restful. Then Maya let them into a large room which was so inviting and so filled with art treasures that Jack Odin stood dumbfounded. He whistled. "This room would cost a fortune in Washington."

She picked up a statuette of a golden girl. "This was given to me, but most of the things here

were made by me or my people. Just as this house was built by my ancestors, block by block. We buy and sell very little—"

Gunnar, who seemed as much at home here as Maya, took Odin upstairs and gave him a room with a marble bath adjoining which was nearly as large as the room itself.

The water in the bath was slightly salt. Odin would have stayed there with his chin barely out of the water for an hour or two, but Gunnar hurried him out. The clothes which the little man brought him was something like linen, but even lighter. They were not greatly different from the summer clothes which Jack had left in Maryland. All were monogrammed with a red and ivory key—even the socks and shorts. The trousers were light gray and the loose-fitting shirt was a shade darker. Odin was to learn that the men of this world of Opal had a distaste for white—although they had nothing against flaming colors, even in silk or nylon. But, just as in the world above, he was never able to account for any particular fashion or style.

Much refreshed and cooler, Odin stood at the window and looked down at the fine yard below. The shadows lay like black stripes across the green lawn. He wondered what time it was. And then remembered that those shadows always stayed the same.

Gunnar brought a pair of sandals and a small gold chain.

"What's this?" Odin asked,

looking at the tiny links with admiration.

"You had better put the key on it and wear it around your neck and under your shirt," Gunnar advised. "The key means much here. Maya tells some fine tales about her people, but men have died for that key before."

"It will make an awkward dog tag, friend."

"Eh, I do not understand. Oh, yes, you have been a soldier. Well, I have done some soldiering too—"

"And what would a land like this need with soldiers?"

Gunnar laughed. "Half our time is spent in fighting. There are the volps—the brute-things of the woods—you killed one of them for me. They eat both flesh and crops, even as men. Then, years ago, there were some who became pirates and lived on one of the islands. We left them alone, until they started raiding us. For a man should do as he pleases unless he harms other men. Then we wiped them out. Oh, it was a good fight. I have been bored ever since. But these things do not matter. It is the every-day fighting that matters. You see, Nors-King, my people are herdsmen and growers of crops. There are probably as many wild things in this smaller land than there are in the entire world above. We must fight—"

"But why don't you destroy them, as we did?"

"Are you any happier after destroying your wild things?" Gunnar asked simply. "Then too

there is always the chance that a man will provoke you just for the sport of it."

"Good heavens! You make this world sound a great deal different than Maya's world. How about fair play? How about courts? This sounds like a school playground in a tough district when all the teachers are away."

Gunnar's eyes were both twinkling and sad. "At least we are honest about it. Should we set up some institution to protect us when it too might finally become a tyranny?"

"Another thing I don't understand, friend Gunnar, is how you manage to speak my language so well—and in such a short time—?"

"Oh, we have devices to hear through the miles of rock above us. We have taken recordings of your world from time to time. So, please, don't say you are better than we. Anyway, we learned a smattering of your language before we started on that ill-fated journey."

"I see. Now, excuse me for asking these questions. But I know so little about you—"

"That is one of the reasons I am here. Another reason is that I have liked you since we first met—and we have fought side by side."

"Then, if you are a herdsman and farmer, why are you here?"

"Maya sent for us—especially for Jul who was a friend of her father and his father before him. Jul is a very old man. As you

probably have surmised, all is not too well with this world, Jack Odin."

"Yeah, it's ailing. Even as my own. But what can we do about it?"

Gunnar laughed. "You have just arrived, and now you are ready to cure all our woes. Within a short time our sun will begin to wane. I suggest that we eat supper."

"Okay. Okay. I'm squelched, and I'm hungry."

Maya's dining room was large enough for a score of people. The walls were covered with excellent paintings—mostly in reds and blacks. Although there was one scene of a beach with tired waves coming in and low dark clouds gathered above a lone boat wearily beating its way to shore.

Jul was seated at the head of the huge, hand-carved table. Maya to his right, Gunnar and Odin to his left. Below them was a wide expanse of linen tablecloth, with a centerpiece of crimson and orange flowers. These were some sort of tulips, Odin judged, but they were larger than any he had ever seen and had a peculiar, waxy sheen to them as though at any time they might melt and change their shape back to some pristine flower from which they had developed.

The silver and china were beautiful and old. The crystal was so thin that there was a whisper of notes from it at a

touch. The food was good—not too different from the world above. There was a small fowl for each of them, cooked with wild rice in a rich sauce. A vegetable which tasted like asparagus, but was in the shape of a tiny green-white bulb. Maya's bread was more like an English scone; these biscuits and a bowl of fruit completed the meal.

There were no servants in the house. Maya and Jul were talking in that strange but slightly familiar language which had puzzled Jack Odin from the first. Gunnar entertained him with a few more tales of Opal, reminding him that he had never lived until he had fought a cave-bear. And then, abruptly, the dwarf asked:

"How are you with—what you call it—the lariat?"

Odin laughed. "Outside of one summer on a western ranch when I was a kid, I never used one. An old-cowhand taught me a few tricks, but I'm afraid I forgot them long ago."

"Never mind. I will teach you again. Here, in Opal, you would not have forgotten such things. Sometimes I think that Grim Hagen is right. In your world you are so busy making a living that you forget all about living."

Jack borrowed some of Gunnar's own words. "You were up there for a very short time, my friend, and now you are ready to cure all our woes."

Gunnar laughed. "That was a good thrust. Anyway, I will

teach you the—uh—lariat. Here we call it a thon, and our lariat is made of braided leather.”

“The old cowhand told me that his first lariat was the same. And I’ll be glad to learn—”

“And the sword? How can you handle it—”

“Well, I was a fencing champion once.”

“Fencing champion?” Gunnar’s brows knitted in thought. Then he laughed again. “Oh, yes, I remember. Those tiny weapons, like long needles. The face and chest protected. Oh, well, you may have learned something. Here we use a heavier sword. I prefer the broadsword. It makes up for my lack of height.” He looked up at Odin’s shoulders which were above the crown of the dwarf’s head. One wistful look betrayed him. Then he was his usual self as he shrugged. “Oh, well, there is no man, tall or short, who can beat Gunnar.”

“But why this business of swords and lariats?” Odin asked. “Maya said you had atomic power at hand. Failing that, you could use gunpowder. Or would that be sporting?”

Gunnar jerked a broad thumb toward the ceiling. “Up there is a man-made sun. Beyond it are billions of tons of stone. One does not take a chance when his sky might fall upon him. Even a motor that makes noise is outlawed. All of us hate noise. Still, there are some old tales that tell of us flying through the air with little humming motors strapped to our backs. Eh, Nors-King I

can’t answer all your questions. This is a very old land. Perhaps we have improved. Perhaps we have lost some of the things we once knew. I am a herdsman and sometimes a soldier. You will have to go to the Philosophers for the answers to your questions. Meanwhile, it is time for our sun to wane. I never fail to enjoy the sight. Odin, I envy you this first look at our world. It is a grand experience.”

Gunnar moved out of his chair, excused himself to Maya and Jul, and motioned for their guest to follow.

Out in the yard, Gunnar consulted an old-fashioned pocket-watch that had twenty-four runes upon it and said:

“It will begin. Don’t look up until I tell you.”

There was a warning flicker of light—a pause—then two more flickers. Slowly the light faded from the lawn as though drawn swiftly upward. In another minute there was a ghostly twilight. In less than five, night had fallen. Odin looked up. The sun had dwined to the faintest ghost of a moon. Man-made stars were peeking out. Familiar patterns—the Dipper, especially—were twinkling up there. Like lights on a signboard, Jack Odin thought, for these stars seemed close enough to touch. And then a doubting question entered his mind. Why the Dipper? Those stars were certainly not shining through the shell of stone between this world and them. What

would Maya's people have cared about the Dipper?

"For guiding the ships at sea?" Gunnar murmured, as he sensed Odin's questioning. In twelve more hours, our sun will wax once more and the stars will disappear. It is better to go in now."

Indeed it was. There was a noticeable chill in the air and already the dew was gathering on the grass.

They returned to Maya's large living room just as the girl and Jul appeared. Odin detected a faint whirr of machines coming from the direction of the dining room and the kitchen beyond. Evidently, housekeeping was not a great problem in this world of Maya's.

Odin was so interested in the art treasures about them that Maya took two from the wall and handed them to him. One was a mosaic about two feet square of a tiger creeping out from a jungle of mother-of-pearl and jade. The sky above was turquoise and aquamarine. The tiger was jet and topaz. Two magnificent cat's-eyes dominated the mosaic, and bloodstone and ivory made up the widening mouth of the on-rushing cat. Odin gasped. Aside from the art work and the endless hours of labor that had gone into this piece, the stones and bits that made up the mosaic were worth a fortune.

"My grandmother made that," Maya told him proudly. "The

other is much older, a mirror—jetsam of Atlantis which one of our ancestors brought back from the floor of the sea. Is it not lonely?"

It was smaller than the mosaic. The polished surface of the mirror was as bright as though it had been fashioned yesterday. About it was a two-inch frame of gold, wondrously carved. Mermaids and nereids beckoned, tossed their flowing curls at Triton, or dodged an on-rushing sea-dragon mockingly. The entire frame of softest gold appeared to be alive with movement.

"This is one of Atlantis' lesser works," Maya said softly as Odin studied the carving in wonder. "They had a temple a mile square, where gold and silver and chryselephantine carvings never seemed to stop moving. Movement was in all their art. Not like the Egyptians where movement was frozen into art. Still, I have one Egyptian statuette which I may show you some day. An ivory girl with a body that would make your movie queens retire—an ivory girl with the head of a vulture. That head was carved from a single pigeon's blood ruby. It is said that Cheops gave a thousand slaves for this statuette. It and the golden mask were to be the central treasures of Tut-Ankh-Amen's tomb. But thieves stole it from him. An ancestor of mine took it from a soldier in Babylon who was about to break the head away from the body.

He severed the soldier's head first—of course."

There was a sound of footsteps at the door. The chime of silver bells.

Maya opened the door. There stood Grim Hagen, Odin's sometime patient. He was dressed in scarlet and black. At his side hung a short scabbard with a gold handle of a sword gleaming from it. Tall and lean, he looked down at Maya and smiled sardonically. "What is this I hear of you bringing an ape from the upper world to trouble us?" He spoke these words in his own language, but later Maya interpreted them to Odin.

She started to slam the door, but he caught it with his shoulder and advanced. Behind him came two others, each as tall and lithe as Grim Hagen. These too were armed. A short sword hung from each belt and at the other side hung a coiled leather lariat.

The three came in and closed the door behind them. Jul, who had been seated in a large chair with his chin resting upon his hands, looked up at them in wonder.

"So you enter the house of a princess in such fashion, Grim Hagen?" he asked thoughtfully. "I am speaking in English. Answer in the same language lest we offend our guest."

"Be quiet, old man. Go back to your fields and pastures. It will soon be calving time."

"The creatures of the field suffer patiently and are little

trouble. The good God keeps them going year by year. The panther kills and ravens. But in time the panther looks death in the face and does not find it good. I am of the Neeblings. Shall I foretell your fate, Grim Hagen?"

"My fate is lost among the stars. The stars my people lost so long ago. It is the present that is my concern. This upper-ape has been brought here. He has been given one of the keys. That is your work, Jul, yours and Maya's. I come for the key. If my cousin chooses to mate with an ape, that is her concern—"

That was enough for Odin. He stepped forward, fists swinging. For weeks now he had thought it would be so nice to get his hands on that tall, lithe man who had caused him so much trouble. But Grim Hagen stepped aside, and one of his lieutenants met Odin head-on.

They grappled. For a moment, Odin was reminded of the time when he, the greenest of freshmen, had stepped into the ring with an experienced man. This opponent was nearly forty pounds lighter than himself. Still, the man thrust Odin's arms up neatly, got a good grip at the small of his back, and started bending him. Odin lifted his hands up high and brought them down with all his strength.

His opponent lost his grip and stepped back. When he came in again, Odin swung an uppercut

that lifted the fellow to his toes. The man went down like he was poured.

Odin turned about. He hadn't the slightest idea what the rules of the fight were. Kōrea had taught him that it was much better to play without any rules. Grim Hagen still stood arrogantly aside, his hand upon the hilt of his sword. But the remaining lieutenant had drawn his blade when he saw his comrade go down. He advanced, thrusting as he came. Then Gunnar stepped forward, swooping low, catching the soldier's wrist in his big hand. For a moment they stood there swaying, the soldier looking down into Gunnar's face, his teeth clenched, his eyes staring. They struggled. Then there was a snapping sound as of green wood breaking. The sword fell to the floor. Gunnar stepped back, and the soldier stood there with tears of pain in his eyes as he looked down at a wrist which had suddenly become V-shaped.

Now Grim Hagen had drawn his sword, but Gunnar stood his ground. Jack Odin took up a chair and advanced from the side.

"Not now," Gunnar laughed. "Later, Grim Hagen, when I can do the job much more slowly. Now, take your two men and go. But take one last look at the man who saved your life up there. The Aesir have taken up the skeins. I am not the seer that Jul is, but if I don't kill you, Grim Hagen, this man will—"

Grim Hagen's face was dark with wrath. "I will speak in the ape-thing's tongue, so he can understand. He and the Neeblings have signed their death-warrant tonight. And, Maya, who once I asked to be my bride, some day you shall be my slave. I promise that you shall see the end of this world as well as the world above. Sun after sun, planet after planet, these shall be mine. Our people hid like rats in a cave, while the galaxy was waiting to be picked like ripe fruit. Well, no more. The suns shall tremble and the worlds shall quake in fear. The moons shall run down the sky in streamers of light. The old outrage can never be paid. All the gold that could be heaped into this world would not pay it now. Always, there would be some ancient hurt and hate uncovered. I swear it now, the universe shall pay the price, with all the waiting and all the hating heaped upon the scales. It shall pay, and you shall see the smoke of worlds you have never seen. And all that while you shall be my slave—"

"Go, now," Jul said softly. "You have said too much already. Go now, before I let Gunnar kill you."

"I am not afraid of Gunnar, but I am going."

"Then go," Gunnar ordered, his feet braced wide apart.

Grim Hagen and the man with the broken wrist helped the fallen, groaning soldier to his feet. The three went staggering

out the doorway, as beaten and sorry a crew as Odin had ever seen in his soldiering. But the hate which they left behind them hung in the air in heavy waves.

Gunnar took the matter carelessly, even joking about the fight. Maya was troubled. Old Jul had a faraway look in his pale-blue eyes. And Odin fell to wondering what would happen if some day he and Grim Hagen met face to face and alone.

CHAPTER 5

DOCTOR Jack Odin and Gunnar were indulging in a bit of sword-play and doing some damage to Maya's well-kept lawn.

Odin had fancied himself something of a fencer, but Gunnar was more than a match. He was built so low to the ground. He came forward, sidling like a crab, and he was so quick on his feet that there wasn't any way of knowing where he would next stand. The swords flashed and clanged together. Then Odin's blade was twisted from his hands and flew through the air to land in a choice flower-bed some twenty feet away.

Odin felt helpless and chagrined, but Gunnar thrust his straight blade into the ground and came forward to meet him with a whoop.

"Eh, you are doing better, Nors-King, much better. In time you will have me scrambling. Now for the thons. Remember,

a small loop thrown by the wrist. It can be used as a whip too. But don't be off-balance and let some carl grab it and draw you to him. Many a good lad has died that way."

Odin ignored the proffered rawhide lariat and sat down upon a cast-iron bench. "Later, friend Gunnar. Later. My shoulders are aching. And I have things on my mind. A few things to mull over—"

Gunnar sat beside him and mopped his forehead.

"Things to mull over, eh? And could those things be a woman?" He grinned. "Well, I have lost much time these past days. Waiting for Jul to decide what only the Norns can decide. Teaching you to improve yourself. Never have I seen a man whose education has been so neglected. What do those churls up above do with their bodies?"

"I have kept myself in pretty good shape," Jack Odin retorted.

Gunnar chuckled. "You felled Grim Hagen's man right neatly that night. But if you are one of the better specimens, how do the poorer creatures live? They must go in constant fear of death, being as weak as they are."

"Nobody would hurt them. At least, very few would. They get some exercise by going to work and dodging traffic when they cross the streets."

"The poor souls. Well, I must send a few things to the farm. My wife, Freida, will think I

have gone a-voyaging. And I should write a letter. So you sit here and think, and Gunnar will go about his business."

"I didn't know you had a wife."

"Oh, yes, and seven children. Freida will look after the place, while I am gone. The Neebling women have always done so when their men take the wanderlust. They do not worry. Freida's arms are nearly as large as mine. You do not pick your women for strength, Jack Odin. Maybe that is why all of you have gone to seed."

"Nonsense. Our women like pretty clothes and perfume, but right now there are probably plenty of women looking after ranches larger than yours."

Gunnar was thinking again. "I see. You keep the better ones on the farms and ranches and send the skinny undesirables to the cities."

"Confound it, I didn't say that—"

"Oh, well, I should write to mine Freida and order a load of hay. Don't think too hard, friend Odin. Thinking saps the strength and makes a man weak."

With a playful punch at Odin's shoulder, which almost numbed him, Gunnar went across the lawn, rolling as he walked on stout short legs, and disappeared down the street.

Odin sat there in the warm sunlight, his eyes half-closed, thinking of the two weeks that had passed, of the fight in

Maya's house, of Gunnar, of Maya's golden eyes and her smooth tan skin. Of the things he had learned and seen, the art treasures, the beautiful days in this land where it was always June, of Maya's golden eyes and her pouting lips, of the society here below, the few customs he had learned, the people he had met.

He opened his eyes and sat up straight. This was no time for day-dreaming. Pull yourself together, he advised himself. No more wool-gathering. Think. Remember. Sort out everything you have learned. Time's running out, and you had better learn as much as you can, Jack Odin, or you're a dead pigeon.

It was hard to think in such a land as this. A six-inch butterfly, all purple and gold, went sailing across the lawn. Mocking birds were singing. The perfume of flowers and the grass under his feet, the smell of growing things, all these made the air heavy with sleep, and sparkling with an old wonder that the air up above had lost.

Daily, for the past fourteen days, he and Gunnar had worked with the sword and the thon. In addition to the clothes that had been given him upon his arrival in Opal, Jack Odin now owned a scabbard and blade, a wide belt, a leather lariat, and a watch.

The language had come easy. On the second day, despairing of ever learning it, Odin had taken pen and paper and had

written down a few words phonetically. It was Old Norse, unmistakably, so kin to Anglo Saxon which he had once studied that Gunnar was able to understand the few sentences of Beowulf that Odin recited. After that, the lessons went faster. Also, Maya had set aside two hours of each day for her teaching, and with such an instructor a man had to apply himself if he didn't look too long into a pair of golden eyes.

The swordsmanship and the roping was doing fine. Ditto for the language. But all was not well.

Each day, visitors came to Maya's home. Conferences were held. With Jul officiating, and Maya interpreting to Odin, it became apparent to all that the Brons, at least, were at the end of their tether. Their life, their customs, their mores, their thinking: all these were a part of their man-made sun. That sun was misbehaving. Whether it was simply playing out or whether the blasts from the world above were speeding its departure, one thing was certain. Living was becoming intolerable.

Meanwhile, Jack learned, the majority of the people were going about their pleasant ways. It was a peculiar civilization, a strange mixture of Epicurean and Spartan. One man sent word that he would not be at a meeting because he had suddenly decided it would be more interesting to hunt a tiger. Noiseless machines processed most of the

Brons' food. Quick-frozen, it was delivered by tube to each kitchen by merely dialling a catalogue number. Machines kept the houses and streets clean. Machines kept up the lawns, polished the marble, trimmed the trees. Yet, no person except a convalescent or a very old invalid, would have been seen in one of their little powered vehicles that looked something like a boardwalk chair.

These thousands of tiny machines took their energy from the sun. Now, with the sun no longer steady, they were playing out. Jack had suggested a return to a gasoline-powered motor. They looked at him with horror. The noise and the stench, not counting the ultimate effect of vibrations on the roof above them, were abhorrent. Records showed that the little sun was 22 percent behind its energy throwout for the past six months. Duels had increased, others crimes, mostly crimes of passion, were on the up-grade. A small group had banned themselves together, pledging mutual suicide. Another, still smaller, had taken to the temples (which were beautiful places for prayer) and had listened to a man who called himself "The Prophet Mim." At first this had been thought a good idea, until the Prophet Mim suddenly demanded a palace, a harem, and an annuity from the council. Examination revealed that Mim's interest in acquiescence was so

exaggerated that he must be pronounced insane.

The dwarfs were fatalists and refused to be annoyed by the turn of events. They were here merely because of Jul, who was an old friend of Maya's people. Jack Odin gathered that they had little love for the Brons, nor the Brons for them. They merely tolerated each other. Moreover, the Neeblings were used to annoyances. They and their flocks expected to survive somehow. In the hills, in the caves, in the sides of the cliffs. They merely shrugged at the question. They were a very old people, and they were sure that a remnant would come through. Besides, they were firm believers in the Old Norse Pantheon.

Not so with the Brons. They had known what it was to lose a home; now, faced with the same problem once more they were beginning to despair. At first, Odin had thought their tale of coming from a planet of another sun was mere moonshine. But the dwarfs had assured him that such was the case. Moreover, there were a few other facts to be considered. First, the strength of the Brons. Few of the men weighed over one-fifty, but they were fully as strong as Odin. Even Maya, slight as she was, had strength and endurance which both plagued and amazed him. Second, they had copies of ancient photographs. Maya showed him one. A purple-black square of the solar system. The sun with all its planets, and forsaken,

ice-shrouded Pluto nearest to the viewer. Assuming that it was not a fake, here was unmistakable proof. It was a weird, lonely picture, with other suns blinking in the background like diamond points, and the changeless purple-black of space behind the suns and worlds like funereal velvet. Then there was another picture: the Earth, a half-globe nearly filled it, and there was the North American Continent joined to Eurasia by a vast land-bridge. And out there where the curve of this world met the Pacific was the shadow of another continent. These were either forgeries or priceless, but why would anyone take such pains to fashion a fraud? Unless the Brons despised the world above so much that they had created their legends, and the proof of these legends, in order to disclaim their kin.

Perhaps Gunnar was right. Only the Norns knew how they had woven the warp and woof of the past. Only they knew what skeins they would use for the future.

Jack Odin was still sitting there when Gunnar returned on the run. Half-asleep and dreaming about a pair of golden eyes, Odin awoke to find the dwarf shaking him. He had never seen Gunnar so excited before.

"Up. Up. Nors-King. The signals are flashing. The reading is higher than it has ever gone. We are in for The Long Night.

Tighten your belt. Take up your sword. Oh, you fools—" These last words were addressed to the still calm sky as Gunnar shook his fist at the world above and all the races of men that cluttered it up.

Odin got to his feet, still dreaming. "Hurry, Jack," Gunnar urged. "Hurry. Wait at the gate for me. It may come any minute now."

Gunnar ran into the house, short legs flying. Odin heard him call to Jul and Maya, telling them to stay there and bar the doors. He returned on the run, carrying a blazing faggot above his head. He looked so incongruous with his ancient torch in broad daylight and his huge sword almost tripping his ankles that Odin laughed.

"Laugh at me," Gunnar yelled. "Laugh, you fool. But when the Long Night hits stay close by Gunnar. Eh, if you can fight you will get your fill. On the double now. To the shore."

Jack Odin trotted beside him and tried to apologize for his laughter. "Listen, little giant of a man, if there is going to be fighting, why don't we stay back there and defend Maya? Are we going to fight for a shore that does not concern us?"

"Maya can fight for herself. The house is strong as a fort. But if the Long Night comes, and the gauges show that it is coming, there will be things on the beaches and things from the jungle that will frost your hair. Run, Jack Odin. Oh, those idiots

up above. A man has enough to worry about in this world without drawing bad neighbors."

Soon they caught up with a little group of armed men with torches, all of them trotting excitedly toward the beaches. A siren began wailing. Beep-beep-beep— A silence and then two quick beep-beeps that nearly burst Jack's eardrums.

They came to the beach. Men were there, lighting huge bonfires. Already, they had fired the low, wooden piers.

The siren screamed again. Then, before the last "beep" was out, the sun above them went black and the siren was cut off. They were in pitch dark now, save for the bonfires and the burning piers. The blackest night that Odin could ever remember, rimmed by red flashes, with a strange, growing chill in the air that seemed to press down upon his shoulders.

"The Long Night lasted seven hours before. Stay at my side, Odin," Gunnar told him. "Hell comes from the deep—"

Already, Odin was beginning to sense the fear and the cold that was about them. Opal's nights had been fixed, with a ghostly moon and a host of stars. But this was the blackness of an inner cave, the complete lack of light which one experiences in a tunnel when the power is suddenly cut off. The air was growing colder, but the chill that bit into him was more than the loss of heat. It was old, born of the

first men's terror as they crept through ancient caverns while the things of the night screamed at the cave-mouth.

There was now a wall of men at the beachhead. Gunnar and Odin took their places and stood side by side near the dancing shadows of a fallen but still blazing pier. "Watch. Out there." Gunnar cautioned as he pointed seaward. "Is there a wave coming in?"

Jack shielded one side of his face from the flames and strained his eyes. There was nothing to be seen but the darkness, and a thin line of flames stretching into the night from one pier which had nearly burned out.

Then he saw it. A wave—but neither of foam nor water. The things of the deep were coming to land. He saw one huge snake-like head, thrust high above the wave, its mouth opened in fear. Another, an armored thing, was striking to left and right as it cleared a path. Huge turtles, serpents, something that looked like a gator but drove forward with razor-edged flippers. Small things; wriggling things; huge, bellowing things; slashing things; striking things! They came on in one great wave of fear. The dark was filled with their sound. And the men at the beachhead braced themselves and called to each other as they waited for this hurricane of flesh and claw and fang to strike.

It struck.

After that there were hours upon hours of striking and

thrusting, dodging, falling back, and rushing forward. Jack Odin's arms ached. The things of the sea came on and on. Fear-crazed, they bellowed and screamed. There was nothing to do but slash and hack at that wriggling, striking wall, while Gunnar swung his broadsword as though he was flailing his barley and kept up a weird, blood-curdling war-cry. Heads were lopped off. Talons and flippers were severed. Once a huge serpent thrust its head toward them. Gunnar split its skull and the thing fell back into the water, churning it to bloody foam and taking others with it as it died. The armored things were worse. One had to thrust at their open mouths and try to keep hilt and hand away from those flashing teeth. The little things got under foot. Odin's standing-place became a pool of slime and blood and quivering flesh. Even the things that breathed water were caught in that wave of fear and came ashore to flop and die and add their stench to the night's horror.

Hour after hour the things came on. Hour after hour the men slashed and hacked. The defending wall grew thinner. Once, from the corner of his eye, Jack Odin saw a long neck flash out and a gaping mouth dodged a sword-thrust and took a warrior by the shoulder. Flesh and bone crunched as the thing tossed the man high. But Jack had little

time to watch the battle. It was a matter of facing straight ahead and hacking and thrusting away. Or, occasionally, dodging to either the left or right to help Gunnar and the fighter who stood at his other side. Though in this case, it was Gunnar who came to his rescue, most of the time. The stout dwarf with the huge arms and the long sword was drenched with slime and blood. Something had raked him across his face, and a gruesome sea-lizard had got its fangs deep into his thigh before they had killed it. But Gunnar was enjoying himself.

Between war-cries, he gasped out his encouragement.

"There. Nors-King. Oh, that was a good thrust. Swing, man, swing. There. Strike and lop. Oh, you would. Well—" This spoken, as he slashed the throat of a mailed thing that looked like nothing Odin had ever seen before. Then he would roar out his old Norse war-cry and cheer them on as they faltered. "On. On. Oh, it is a good fight. Not a weakling in the line. And all of them swinging. Shoulder to shoulder. Kill and kill and kill. Oh, this is good. Like the tales of the old-ones, when gods and men stood up against the giants. Fight."

Behind them reinforcements waited and threw wood upon the fires.

The man to Odin's left was panting. "If there was only some light in the sky. Even a star—"

And Gunnar roared back. "What matters it, man? If the stars are gone we can still fight. Though the blackness take form like the dragon of darkness and coils itself about Gunnar—why, then, Gunnar will still fight." He began to chant an old song: "Oh, the ravens will feast tomorrow, and some good lads will lie dead, and there will be rejoicing and weeping, and the gods will drink deep, knowing that a man can still stand sturdy on his own two legs and fight."

"Save your breath, little man," Odin warned. "Here comes something that looks like a boxcar."

"A boxcar? Oh, I remember. Well, it does not matter." Gunnar was drunk from fighting.

At times there was a lull. As the fires behind the line leaped higher the onrushing wall of things drew back. At times the shallows were so filled with dead and dying that the frantic beasts could not come forward, but stayed yards away, bellowing, screaming, hissing, feeding.

Then a wave would clear the beach and the creatures of the deep would come on blindly.

So the fighting went. And so the Long Night passed. There was a flicker of light. Then a glow in the sky above them. And quite suddenly the sun was blazing in the loft.

The things of the deep stopped their charge. Rid of their fear-madness, they circled about and headed out to sea. Odin watched them go until they van-

ished, a long, shadowy wave rippling in the distance.

Then Gunnar and Odin walked away from the dead and the stench. They fell upon the sand and lay there gasping.

Rested, Gunnar got to his feet. "Up, Jack, up. There is much to do. We must see how the others fared against the things of the jungle. Maya and Jul may need us. Oh, it was a good fight. There has been too much talk of dying. Last night Gunnar lived."

"But why did the things keep coming on?" Odin asked. "Was it the complete lack of light that maddened them?"

"I don't know. I am only a soldier and herdsman. Jul says that when the sun goes out there are disturbing rays left in the night. What does it matter? They came and we held them back. Up man, take up your sword. There may be things skulking through the streets," Gunnar said.

They went back through the town. Everywhere was wreckage. Carnage and blood. Here and there were the bodies of men, and torn carcasses of animals littered the streets. Tigers and ape-things mostly. But even tiny, furry things had gone mad during the night.

Gunnar and Odin found the body of a man sprawled over a dead tiger. Even in death he still pressed the haft of his knife against the beast's side. Crews were already busy cleaning the streets and gathering up the dead.

A woman was weeping over

the torn body of a man. And as they went on, Jack Odin thought:

"Then, for all its years, this land is no better than mine. Bloodshed and tears. The fighters rejoicing over their victory, and the women weeping for their dead."

CHAPTER 6

FOR two weeks the people of Valla—men, women and children—were at work rebuilding the damage of that long and terrible night.

The dwarfs sent help from the outlands. Sawmills and quarries, abandoned and overgrown by vines, were reopened and for a time Valla was a place of noise and workmen. Odin fancied himself a good hand with the hammer and saw, and he worked on the piers. As for the other buildings that were damaged, they were rebuilt by artisans, with countless man-hours allotted to sculptors and artists. Shrubs and trees were planted. The trampled flower-beds were rebuilt. Indeed, Odin learned, the landscape gardener held a high position of respect in the world of Opal.

Once he went with Maya to a funeral. It was a simple affair. As the many beautiful temples in the city proclaimed, there was only The One, and men should worship him as they pleased. There were a few words of tribute to the dead man, who had fallen during the fighting that

night. Then a minute of silent prayer and the body was committed to the earth.

"For," Gunnar explained, "he now knows more about the One and the world beyond than we do. For us to say any more to the dead would be like a child trying to explain an element to a scientist."

On another afternoon, Maya took him to the Tower of the Physicians. They were mending the scars of the wounded. One man who had lost an arm was being given a new one. A child who had developed a tremor during that awful night was being cured. The repair of flesh and bone and the shaping and mending of the brain and nerves, these were the practices of the physicians of Opal. There was no sickness. An operation for a tumor or an infection was unknown. After being introduced to some of the doctors, Jack told them of his schooling and limited practice. They were amazed. One even suggested that he was joking. That the human body could be attacked and even destroyed by microbes was unbelievable. Their theory was that healthy flesh was immune to the poison of germs. There were no dentists in Opal. If a person lost a tooth from an accident, the physicians merely planted a tooth-bud in the gum by means of a delicate operation and in a short while a new tooth was growing.

Then the sound of the hammer and saw was gone. Valla

looked even more beautiful than ever. The city returned to its old listless beauty.

But Jack Odin sensed that things were going on under the surface of this quiet little city. There were more groups upon the streets, talking quietly and excitedly. He knew the language well enough now. After that night's fighting, most of the people welcomed him. But a few still gave him cold glances as he passed.

At last Grim Hagen agreed to put his cold rage aside and meet with Maya and Jul. The result of their conference was a call for a gathering of all the people's representatives at the Council Tower the following day.

After Grim Hagen departed, Maya fell weakly into a chair and buried her face in her hands. "All this work and so little done. Nothing agreed upon. No plans—"

"But you and Jul have worked hard enough," Odin said, "while Grim Hagen has been sulking in his tent. I have been of no help at all. Why, I've even made things worse for you. Better take back the key you gave me, Maya."

"That too will be decided tomorrow. But they will accept you, Jack. I know they will. My people are fair. There must be some way out. Grim Hagen's idea of destruction is impossible—"

"Some day Grim Hagen's going to get it."

"Jack," she asked softly, "do you think the people up there would ever accept me? Or would I ever learn to like them? We could go back, you and I. But, no, that would be a coward's way. To leave them here—" She began to cry.

"There, now." He patted her shoulder. "I've said all along that there is no problem. You will be welcome up there. Everyone will."

"Perhaps. But we have centuries of fixed thinking behind us. There is not a person on the street who doesn't think that the world up above is an inhospitable place, filled with weaklings and idiots, dedicated to dullness and mediocrity, the nations armed to the teeth and always fighting. How could we ever overcome that—"

"You and your people are great hands at talking about individualism. I think it is a problem for each individual. Now, take you, for instance. Maya, you could go back with me. The two of us could work things out—"

She got to her feet and put her arms around his neck. Then, standing on tiptoe, she kissed him. "There!" she said, backing away, tears still shining in her eyes. "That is for saying such nice things to me, Jack Odin. But it cannot be. It would be a selfish thing for us to do. Besides, you underestimate Grim Hagen. He is a destroyer—"

But Odin stepped forward and took her in his arms and kissed

her until the tears turned to laughter—and for the moment the troubles that beset the world of Opal were forgotten.

The next day he went with Maya to the Council Tower. It was one of Valla's most resplendent buildings. The massive doors to the Tower were black marble with thick panes of glass which were so clear that one had to touch them to prove that they were there. The entire façade of the Tower consisted of twelve-foot squares of silver framed in the same black marble. Each silver square contained a bas-relief showing some chapter in the history of the Brons and Neeblings.

Entering, Odin looked up to see that there were no floors within the Tower. High above, at least six hundred feet above, was a ceiling so cunningly contrived that one seemed to look at the sky where wisps of white clouds floated along. On the far side of the ground floor was a dais with five huge chairs sitting in a line at one side and twenty chairs ranged together on the other side. Between the entrance and the dais were row after row of chairs. The floor slanted downward so that each spectator could have a view of the dais. To right and left, a circular staircase went up the sides of the walls, and at twenty-foot intervals were balconies shaped like fluted shells. The newels to these staircases were chromium, and leaves and acorns

were so cunningly carved about them that they gave the appearance of tall trees growing up to the sky.

The Tower was a masterpiece of art and architecture. Surely it would seat every adult in Valla.

Jul, Maya and Jack Odin went forward and took their places on three of the five huge chairs. Odin protesting. Soon Grim Hagen, dressed in black and scarlet, took the fourth seat and gave them a black scowl.

After he was seated, twenty old men—four of them dwarfs—filed onto the dais, bowed, and took their seats at the other side. The Tower began to fill. The chairs below them were soon taken. Twin streams began climbing the stairways and flowing out upon the balconies.

At last the doors were closed. A huge man in a tight-fitting black cloak walked out upon the dais. He placed a slug-horn to his lips and blew one blast. Then he announced that the High Council of the cities and outlands of Brons and Neeblings of the World of Opal was now in session. That the Low Council of the cities and plains had been seated. That the High Council with one member absent was ready to consider. Then he began a chant which seemed as old as time. It was filled with admonishments. And it closed with the plea that if any man, Neebling or Bron, had been imprisoned since two wanings of the sun without a hearing, now let

the friends and relatives of that man step forth and be heard.

No one came forward. Indeed, the chant appeared to be a formality, born of causes won so long ago that no one paid any attention to its meaning.

“—And now, the High Council and the Low Council are here to consider the welfare of all. And may the just and the unjust attend to their decisions.”

There was a final ear-splitting blast, followed by the triumphant words: “The Councils of the Brons and Neeblings are now in session.”

Odin was looking at the empty chair. “It is for the Chief Scientist,” Maya whispered. “In two hundred years the Scientists have not sent a delegate.”

Grim Hagen got to his feet. He did not speak loudly, but his words were heard in the upmost balcony. “The special meeting has been called for many reasons. However, before it may continue, we must consider a new member. This man!” He pointed to Odin with a gesture which plainly showed his contempt. All the while, he was mockingly playing the part of one who sticks strictly to rules of order. “This man,” he repeated, “has been seated upon instructions of Jul and Maya. Neither I nor the Scientist have voted—”

Maya rose to her feet, her golden eyes blazing, her black curls tossing. “The Scientists have not voted for centuries,” she retorted. “And you were un-

conscious at the time. Two votes of the only three who were available makes a majority. This man, Jack Odin, has been duly appointed."

Grim Hagen started a hot reply, but Jul interrupted. "The matter has been questioned. It has been talked abroad. Arguments are useless. We will now leave the matter to the people."

"But this man is an outlander—a creature from the upper world." Grim Hagen was sputtering.

"This man fought for us a few nights ago," Maya answered haughtily. "Jul and I have given him the key because he is from the upper world, which must soon be concerned with our worries whether we wish so or not—"

There were cries of: "Maya is right. A fighter like her father. Yes, he fought. Fought like a wildcat—"

And dissenting remarks, such as: "We want no ape from the outlands on our council. Take him away. He comes after Maya, and doesn't give a bowstring for all of us—"

Jul silenced the murmuring. "We will vote now. By voice. Let each man and woman speak up. Shall the man from the world above be one of the council? Those who are for the question may speak."

They spoke. There was a roar of applause. It echoed from roof to balcony. "Yea."

The applause died. Jul spoke

again. "And those who are against the question may speak."

There was a scattering of Nays, hissings, and catcalls. Quite noticeable, but nothing like the applause Odin had just received.

Jul smiled at Grim Hagen. "There, my friend. They have spoken, and Jack Odin is now one of us. Shall we continue now with the problems of the day?"

Grim Hagen bowed sardonically. "Please do, my friend." Venom dripped from the last word.

Jul ignored him. "We are in trouble. Dire trouble. As you know, we sent a delegation to the world above. I myself was one of that delegation. But it was mismanaged—" He paused to bow to Grim Hagen, whose black scowl was growing blacker—"and we accomplished little in that attempt."

"We accomplished nothing," Grim Hagen retorted.

"Now, since the Long Night of two weeks ago, it becomes vital that we decide upon some course to follow, for our affairs are going from bad to worse. First, we will speak. Then, the Lower Council will give any suggestions that it can think of. And last, let anyone in attendance speak out if he has anything worthwhile to say. But one thought. I am an old man, and my advice is for us to consider our honor. I would rather go down honorably than to live with the fires of hate and guilt consuming me until nothing but

ashes is left of life. First, we will hear from Grim Hagen—"

Grim Hagen's supporters set up a burst of applause as he advanced to the center of the dais. Odin had to admit that the man had a wonderful self-assurance about him, and was a gifted public speaker.

Grim Hagen bowed. "My friends, there is but one immediate answer to our troubles. The world above is divided. It is a sickly race. And, certainly, it has caused us much grief. Their atomic tests have almost destroyed our sun. We have lived here for ages without bothering them, but now we have no choice. I say, let us gather our weapons, the old, terrible weapons—and destroy them. Living with them has become impossible. That is all."

There was another round of applause. Then a vote was taken on Grim Hagen's suggestion. It was voted down, although Odin thought uneasily that there were far too many in favor of the idea.

Jul next announced his plan.

He pointed to the empty chair. "How long has it been since a Scientist sat with us? Not in my time." He shook his head. "And yet the Scientists have one of the keys and it is they who own the Treasure House where the Old Ship is lying. We have had so little to do with the Scientists these last years that perhaps I should tell the younger ones what I know of the land of Orthe-Gard. It is another penin-

sula like our own, far across the sea. Its people are Brons, but they do not think like you. They are Philosophers and Scientists. They live for thinking, and some day they hope to solve the riddle of the universe. They do not trust us, because we are fun-loving, because we sometimes shed blood. And yet, they are your brothers, and they have one of the keys. And, by the old law, Orthe-Gard and the Treasure House is theirs. Now, I will tell you of the Treasure House, for I was there many times in my youth. Centuries of Brons' and Neeblings' work went into its building. It is greater than any tower we know. It has over a hundred floors, but for nearly thirty stories it is built flush against the side of the precipice—for a reason. Set within the precipice is a tunnel. There are the old treasures of the Brons and the Neeblings. And there is the Old Ship—the indestructible ship that brought your people to this planet so long ago. And there are the treasures of the sea. For this tunnel goes out onto the sea-floor. It is sealed by doors as large as this tower. Our people set them there long and long ago. Now the treasure house is generally open, but the door to the tunnel is fastened by five locks. That is the reason for the five keys."

Jul paused and looked at his audience expectantly.

"I propose that we four go to Orthe-Gard and confer with the Scientists. They may know how

to save our little sun. Or, failing that, we can determine if the old ship can be readied for departure. Just in case—"

The listeners began their applause before he could bow. Much to Odin's surprise, Grim Hagen rushed forward and endorsed Jul's scheme.

The Low Council too was unanimous in their endorsement. And, after anticipating hours of squabbling, Jul, Maya, and Odin found themselves on their way home within less than thirty minutes of their arrival at the Tower.

CHAPTER 7

JACK ODIN and Maya were leaning upon the rail of a white ship that slid noiselessly and slowly through the low waves of a sparkling sea.

Behind them, sprawled out upon easy chairs were Jul, White Owl and Gunnar. White Owl and Jul were asleep. The little giant was looking up at the sky, lazily awaiting something to happen. Now and then he stole a look at the two at the rail and smiled.

Not far away a sea serpent, with its head and several coils of its long body thrust out of the water was pacing them. It seemed to be a peaceful creature now—far different from the things of its kind which had rushed the beaches that night. A few birds sailed overhead, their wings motionless as they glided with the barest trace of a breeze. Flying

fish played in the water, and once a vast thing like a floating island raised its dripping body half out of the water and opened a tiny mouth at the end of a long neck to hiss at them. Then it sank from sight, leaving a fountain of spray to cascade after it. Jack looked down. Three of the things that he had learned to hate during the Long Night were wallowing near the ship, waiting for scraps. Gunnar called them fang-fish, though they appeared to be no more kin to a fish than a gator. Except for razor-edged flippers and a more elongated snout they did resemble a gator. When questioned about sharks, Gunnar had replied that no such critters were in the waters of Opal. If there had ever been, he judged, the fang-fish must have destroyed them long ago. They were ugly brutes, always hungry. Both scavengers and hunters, they were hated and loathed. Jack figured that they must breed like flies or they could never have survived. Hardly a day passed that the sailors did not kill at least a dozen.

With Maya leaning against him and holding his hand, a dreamy wonder fell over Jack Odin as he looked down at that sluggish sea and thought of the billions of life-things that swarmed in the semi-tropical deep.

Then he remembered a Ph.D. he had known in Korea. The man had put his books aside to become a slovenly soldier—slovenly

but handy with a book, a bottle, and a burp-gun. The Ph.D. was dead now. Someone had clobbered him two days before the armistice. But in the retreat from the Yalu the Ph.D. had picked up a little jade carving of a dragon. It was a work of art, he had insisted. Also, it was the keystone of a book that he was going to write. A book that would astound the scientific world. It was the ex-professor's theory that the astronomical figures put upon the various geological periods was pure moonshine—that they had been shorter and often overlapped into the next age, refusing to die. For example, the dinosaurs. Surely they had lasted into the age of mankind or why would there be so many tales of dragons?

It now appeared that the Ph.D. and the book he would never write were correct. Those mountains of flesh with the small heads were certainly kin to the brontosaurus. And these fang-fish—not fish at all, but saurians lost out of time.

Odin shrugged his shoulders. Here, and with such a beautiful companion as Maya, and on this warm sea, aboard a noiseless ship that was barely moving, one could afford to be philosophical. Right or wrong, what difference did his dead friend's opinions matter now? And books that are never written always manage to be better than those that someone writes. Like the fish that gets away, or the

girl that a man never got around to kissing—

Maya gave him a playful shove. "Come back from wherever you have been, Doctor Odin. We are alive here, you know, and if you fly away to Dreamland, who will look after you?"

He laughed and put his arm around her shoulder. "Not dreaming. Remembering. And thinking—" Then, half-confiding, he added: "Those things down there are supposed to be dead ages ago. They are supposed to be extinct."

She shivered. "I wish they were. But can't we talk of more pleasant things?"

"Sure. Cabbages and kings for instance. Or queens. Now, if you could forget your real or fancied responsibilities to this world, we could go back to my home and get married. I could open up an office and trot to it every day—and woe to any patient who got sick and called me out at night. You could join the bridge club, and maybe we could make the country club. We could buy all kinds of junk, and make a down-payment on practically everything. We would be quite happy and quite dull. You could sit across from me each morning at the breakfast table and pour my coffee while I read the morning paper and find out just what international dither we are going to be shook up about today."

She pouted. "I would not. You

would look at me or I would never get out of bed—"

"I wouldn't tolerate a late sleeper in the house—"

"What are we talking about?" It was Gunnar. He had slipped out of his chair and was standing behind them with a gleam of merriment in his eyes.

"Eh? Oh, the international situation," Jack hastened to assure him.

Gunnar laughed. "Then the international situation hasn't changed much since I was a young soldier and was courting Freida."

He laughed and winked and gave Odin a playful dig in the ribs. "And how do you like our ship?" he asked.

"We have faster and noisier ones."

"More speed. More noise. You go places faster so you can return faster. You go so fast and hurry so much that you are like the boy who got the tiger by the tail. They were running in a circle and going so fast that the boy wasn't sure whether he was chasing the tiger or the tiger him. But he hoped that someone would come along before the race was over."

It was a peculiar ship. Sparkling white, with neither sail nor smoke. Jack understood that it was powered by huge batteries that were daily charged by the sun. There was hardly a sound from it. No vibration at his feet. They sailed dreamily along at a pace of five miles per hour. No

more. No less. Always, the five miles. The sea was so calm that there was no lurching. Odin had never been a good sailor, but he had seen lakes back home with higher waves than these.

They had been voyaging for three days now. Two more and they would dock at the home of the Scientists. Jul had assured him that he was in for one of the Marvels of the World. The Treasure House. It had taken centuries of Brons and Neeblings to build it. Higher than the Empire State Building, it was one elaborately carved cube, set against the precipice wall for thirty floors. After that, it became a faery cathedral going up and up, always growing smaller, until at last one golden spire with its lesser spires below it, reached up into the sky like a prayer and caught at the trailing clouds.

"Carvings. Jewels. Gold. Silver. Ah, lad," Jul had grown reminiscent. "What would I give to be young again and to see the Treasure House for the first time!"

During the long days, Maya and Jul had taken turns with the books, teaching Odin more and more about Opal. Gunnar had set aside three hours per day for the sword and the thon. That had still left a great many hours, though not near enough, to be alone with Maya.

Grim Hagen and one of his lieutenants were on board but they stayed in their cabins. Once a day they came upon the deck

for a bit of swordplay. Grim Hagen was good, Odin admitted. Plenty good.

Grim Hagen spoke curtly to Maya and the dwarfs. He looked through Odin when he came top-side. Odin had gritted his teeth. Some day—some day soon—he would get his hands on that arrogant fool, and all the Physicians wouldn't be able to put him together again.

So the hours passed. Quietly. Calmly. It was like a dream come to life. Or the remembrance of past things. An unhurried quiet. A faery ship on a faery sea with a faery sky above them. Troubles and panic might have lain all around them, but these were ignored. When they reached the land of the Scientists there would be time enough to talk over their troubles. Meanwhile, life was good. They became like the birds who perched on deck for a short spell. There were weary hours of flight behind them and they did not know what lay ahead. But here was rest and quiet. There was nothing to do but look at the world around them. And the world was good—

It was but a few moments before the waning of the sun. Odin and Maya, after pages of lessons, had returned to the rail. Gunnar and White Owl were fencing upon the deck—White Owl silent and nimble, Gunnar strong and loud.

"It has been a good day," Maya was saying as she leaned

her cheek against Odin's shoulder. Such a beautiful day. If God should give this as the last day to the world, then no one should complain."

Odin had been looking far off toward the west. A bank of clouds had settled down upon the sea and little flashes of heat-lightning were twinkling across them.

"Maya," he cried. "See there." He pointed toward the cloud-bank.

"What, dearest. I don't see anything."

And then the little sun gave its warning flicker and dwined to the ghost of a moon which was already writing its old runes of silver upon the sea.

Maya shivered, and clung to him. "What was it, Jack—"

He rubbed his eyes. "I couldn't tell. I can't be sure. Just before that cloud-bank settled down I thought I saw a ship over there. Then other ships. All close together. Many ships—"

She laughed. "It was only a cloud-bank. See, there are no lights over there. And with the going of the sun our ship is alive with lights. It is the law—"

Then she kissed him. It was such a long kiss that he forgot about ships and cloud-banks—

CHAPTER 8

THE next two days were uneventful. Odin and Gunnar watched for ships but none were seen. On the fifth day there were more birds about them, and they

passed several beautiful little islands.

Then "Orthe-Gard Ho!" came a cry from the lookout. They rushed to the forward rail, old Jul standing proudly by Odin to watch his face at the first sight of the Treasure House.

Before them with a rising mist above its housetops was Orthe-Gard. It was a fine city, Jack thought, but no better than Valla. Standing apart from him and his group were Grim Hagen and Hagen's lieutenant. Odin watched the man for a second. As they neared Orthe-Gard, Grim Hagen's face became a set sardonic mask, and his black eyes blazed as though at long last he had found a treasure and was reaching forth to take it.

Then the mist began to rise, and back of the city of Orthe-Gard, over against the cliff-wall was the Treasure House. At first Jack could see only the lower part of it. An immense cube, even as Jul had told him, with carved windows and balconies high up—and the entire front covered with inlay of gold and silver and marble. The mist rose higher and Jack gasped for breath. Up and up it went, always tapering. Spire after spire flashed in the sun as the mist withdrew. It was all gold and rosy marble at the midway point. And as the mist lifted he saw that the marble predominated, deepening in color, until the very top of the tower was like a sunset—with one needle of gold

still reaching upward toward the sky.

Maya thrust a pair of field glasses into his hand. They brought the tower into easy view, and Jack marveled at the carvings and inlay. There was not a square foot of space that had not been worked by a master hand—no, millions of master hands! Stones of all colors flashed, blazed and smoldered there. Some of the gold and silver carvings must have weighed tons. Jul had prepared him for the sight, in a way, but this was far beyond Jul's description. More massive at the base than any building he had ever seen, taller than any on Earth, it was an architecture where strength and beauty were so skilfully woven together that not a line was lost. Tower after tower, soaring upward, with each one adding a note to the symphony of color. Even the gold filigree work on the outside balconies, which at this distance looked like fine lace, appeared to blend into the whole of that cathedral of stone and gems and precious metals.

Jack Odin shook his head in wonder. It defied the imagination. Not even the exaggerated tales of Ormuz or the fancied city of Cibola, which had been a lonely dream in men's hearts, could equal the strength and beauty of this tower.

He watched it, awe-struck, until they docked. A bespectacled man in a pale-green robe was the leader of the small group

which came to meet them. He was a trifle stooped and his hair was iron-gray—but his face had a youngish look.

"Welcome," he said, smiling quietly. "I am Wolden—the one you call the Chief of the Scientists and Philosophers. We do not use the term here. Here, I am merely Wolden. No one is chief—"

They acknowledged his greeting. He remembered Jul, and the two exchanged a few words about their families. Then he introduced the rest of the party.

"My son, Ato." A tall, young man with a short-sword at his side stepped forward. He looked more like the young men of Valla than the men of Orthe-Gard. The rest of the party consisted of scientists and thinkers whose work had won them a place in the councils of Orthe-Gard. Several wore glasses. Odin had not seen a pair in Valla—not even Jul had needed them.

As they went through the clean streets, Jack noted that there were fewer pretentious buildings. Here were more shops and meeting places. They passed several book-stalls. These were as new to Odin as the spectacles. In Valla the books were hand-me-downs. There were no libraries, and though many of the editions he had seen were works of art few had been read of late.

Wolden kept up a flow of talk, as pleasant and unimportant as that of any experienced diplomat. "After you have refreshed yourselves we have planned a

dinner. I am sure you will enjoy it. We have developed some fruits here far different from the parent stock. And after that, as custom decrees, we must try the locks of the Tower." He laughed and spoke aside to Odin, "It is an ancient custom. An atom blast could not wreck the door—"

"It is more than a custom," Grim Hagen announced sharply. "There has been no inspection in years. How do we know that the old treasures are there?"

His rude comment threw a cloud over the party. Ato looked at Grim Hagen, frowned, and his right hand fell lightly to the handle of his sword.

But Wolden laughed. "The people of Orthe-Gard have kept the treasures for nearly twenty-five thousand years, Grim Hagen. I am sure that in the last ticking of time there has been no pilfering—"

Grim Hagen remained stiff-necked. "Time is ticking out," he retorted sullenly. "And time has changed—"

Wolden smiled sadly. "Yes, changes come and go. But if we had two more centuries, free and unbothered, we could prove to you that time does not exist."

He sighed and tried a half-cheerful smile. "That word *if*. It streams through the universe like a flash of light. And it leaves the stardrifts behind it. It closes its books on bugs and men and suns like an old accountant. But, once mastered—"

He sighed again. "Well, never mind. We of Orthe-Gard welcome you, and as our friend says: 'Time is ticking out.'"

The little party from Valla had docked at Orthe-Gard near the tenth hour. Wolden gave them rooms in his home. Later, they had been given a quick tour of the city—in little powered cars, for the people of Orthe-Gard did not share Valla's contempt for vehicles. At one o'clock they had banqueted and had met more of the city's dignitaries. There had even been a few speeches. All as dull as the ones that had bored Odin to distraction in the world above.

Now, at three, they stood in front of the door of the Treasure House. Craning their necks they looked up and up at that wealth of carvings and metalwork—until they grew dizzy and looked back at the door in continued awe.

Wolden and Ato led them into the tower. Here, the scientists and philosophers had gathered the wealth of Opal. Paintings, sculpturings, designs, room after room, corridor after corridor. They saw several reading rooms as large as most libraries. Students and teachers wandered through the halls, talking low to one another. There were fossils and pictures taken from Jack's world. There were displays of ancient machines and tools.

Once, Grim Hagen paused before a small helicopter. "Has the motor been removed from this?"

he asked. His contempt for these devices was plain enough.

"Yes," Wolden sighed. "In accordance with an old agreement. An agreement which was a mistake, I fear—"

"It was no mistake," Grim Hagen scowled. "These would have softened the race—"

"Perhaps. Let the race have thews of steel and die here," was Wolden's soft-spoken reply.

Ato tried to change the subject. "There are thousands of rooms here. Perhaps you will have time to see them all. Right now, we are taking the most direct route to the door."

"It's like some old university and the Smithsonian combined," Odin said admiringly.

"I have heard of the Smithsonian," Ato answered. "Some day, I would like to see it."

"And you shall, my friend," Odin assured him. "All this talk of death and not daring to associate with the world above is nothing but graveyard music. All of you have got spooky down here. What you need is more air and a real sun above you—"

Grim Hagen sneered once more. "You have seen only a few of our treasures. Imagine what that pack of rats up there would do with them. The blood they would shed— Within a week the world above would turn this into a shambles."

Odin could feel the blood surging to his face. "Grim Hagen," he told the dark man savagely, "some day I am going to kill you. I have had enough of your

insults, but this is no time to fight. Don't push me—"

Grim Hagen bowed. "Any time, Odin. Any time—"

"Boys. Boys!" Jul shook his head—

In an embarrassed and infuriated silence they came to the door that led out into the tunnel.

Here were the five locks that Odin had heard so much about. The door was massive enough, as large as the door to a good-sized hangar.

Five keys were ceremoniously produced. The doors swung open. Maya clung to Odin as they looked forward into a gulf of shimmering light.

Here was the tunnel, growing larger as it receded from them. Set into the rock walls was something more than phosphorous. It glimmered and glittered. Sparks flashed from it into the time-worn air. And Odin found himself thinking: This was the way it was in the beginning, with light forming itself from darkness, and the atoms flashing from nothingness, to press together for a million years until their weight exploded into suns and worlds, and God looked upon them and found them good.

Before them was a little truck without a top—larger but resembling the Hill-Billy of the world above. Its wheels were set upon a track.

They took their seats and Ato pressed a button which started the truck moving upon its rails. As they moved forward the light

increased. It was like moving through a panorama of the ages. To right and left were the heaped up treasures of the centuries—unclassified and jumbled together like the collection of an old antiquarian. Weapons, heaps of jewels, strange machines, statuary, paintings, heaps and heaps of leather-bound books, gold, silver, platinum. Here was a 1918 Ford—and there was a skeleton of a tyrannosaur. Resting upon a golden dais was the Laocoon, its marble as bright as though it had been fashioned yesterday. Here an Indian blanket of humming-bird feathers that a score of Indian maids must have worked on for a decade.

Here was an exotic teocalli that must have run with blood during the reign of the Aztecs. There was a Cross set with so many gems that it was a blaze of light. An ancient Oldsmobile was resting beside a Peacock Throne that some Persian king had loved. A doctor's saddlebags leaning against a portable cobalt X-ray.

A Rembrandt which would have covered a wall and a tiny Venus by Botticelli. Guns. The guns that Jesse James might have used, and the cannon from Gettysburg. And beside them a needle-nosed thing which looked so much like death that it must have been born upon another planet.

The car moved forward slowly. The loft above them drew away. The walls receded. But al-

ways there was that spark-filled space which made all things clearly visible but cast no shadow.

On and on. And as the tunnel grew larger they seemed to plunge along a star-swept Milky Way where life and time and light had been frozen into one.

On and on. And now the roof above them was only a shimmering aurora that dripped rose and purple curtains of flame. And the sides of the tunnel were so far away that they gleamed with a misty, golden light. On and on the truck moved while the ceiling and the sides of the tunnel fled away from them.

Until at last they came to a spot where the spaceship was resting.

Odin had grown so accustomed to pictures of spaceships these last years that he had been expecting to see a huge metal cigar. But this was beyond him.

Standing at least three thousand feet into the air, it was more like a gigantic hour glass. In the center of the glass was one great bulb of gleaming-white metal. Coiled about it, up and down, around and around, were tubes of that same metal. And at random intervals these tubes passed through lesser globes of black and white. The globe in the center of the hour glass was at least a thousand feet across—almost the same width as the top and base of the hour glass.

The spaceship was resting upon huge dollies which in turn

had wheels set into chromium tracks—dozens of tracks which went forward into that void of shimmering light.

They went on.

Now the treasures to left and right were alien to Odin. Paintings, sculptures, weapons, they had been born upon another world under another sun. A bronze-skinned man stood with nothing but a spear against an onrushing thing which was mostly teeth and claws and thorny hide.

A nude bronze-skinned girl reclined in a garden where butterflies encircled her until she became the center of a vast flower of whirling color. A bronze Macbeth, knife in hand, walked through a corridor below his castle while the witch-woman hung to the air beside him and urged him on to his doom.

The machines and weapons scattered about had no comparison with the things of Earth. Cylinders, globes, burred ovals, things with barrels, things with needles, things with claws. An aura of the death they could deal hung over them.

Until at last they came to the end of the tunnel and there was the greatest thing that Jack Odin had seen in the world of Opal. It was a massive double-door which resembled cedar, but upon touching it Odin found it to be cold and slightly electrifying metal. They went high up, these doors, over three thousand feet. Here were five locks, as before, and the hinges upon these

doors were of shining brass, and each hinge was larger than the outer gate. Mentally, Odin took off his hat to the men who had built these doors. From behind them came a murmuring as of the sea—and he thought: "To build these was a job for the gods, but to hold the sea back as they built—that would be more than the mind of man can fathom."

There was a steady murmuring, and Jul clutched at Odin's elbow and pointed off to one side. Over there was a smaller door for sending exploring parties into the deep.

He heard Wolden say: "And now, Grim Hagen, we have kept the pledge. Here are the rails and there is the door. We still have our old escape route. We have guarded it—like men who guard a long-dead altar. For the escape route is nothing. It is merely a pathway to the old error. Had you not been so busy with your tiger-hunting, we could have shown you that time and times are done. We have no patience with these things any more. That is why we have not sent a delegate to the Council. These things are dead and done with. Life and time are merely the splashing of silver drops into the pool below the fountain. The fountain itself is the pulse and the flame—changeless and beyond the ticking of time."

Grim Hagen laughed. "I prefer the tiger. Your philosophy is nothing but moonshine—"

"Not moonshine. Flames. We

shall become Ideas casting our thoughts into the gulf. And the thoughts shall be like flame-winged butterflies. And there shall be no death, because there shall be no error. And eternity shall wheel about us in one vast ring of light. Today, tomorrow, and yesterday shall be like a trip to the corner store. And we shall be as gods—"

And, suddenly, Jack Odin found himself remembering an old Sunday School lesson:

"And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven—"

And another: "—now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever:"

Grim Hagen laughed again. "Now, that sounds fine indeed. But the misery of Earth is something that confounds all philosophers. And if I were a philosopher, which I am not, I would prepare for the worst. Then, if it should come, I would face it with a strong back and a good sword. Troubles beset us by the moment—happiness is a vagrant who pays us an occasional visit. I would be strong enough to turn aside any trouble caused by another man—and I would add that man's ears to the balance. You can preach about flame-winged butterflies all you wish, Wolden, but give me a stout arm and a good sword—"

For the first time, Jack Odin found himself sympathizing

with Grim Hagen. And then he remembered a third Sunday School lesson: "They who live by the sword shall die by the sword."

As though sensing his thoughts Grim Hagen drew his blade and held it up toward the light-flecked ceiling. "There. The enemy of tyrants. The steel that holds the usurer away—the bar against the invader of fields. If a man cannot save himself, then the night birds sing his eulogy. If a man's wealth be maidens or gold, respect or home, this is all that keeps out the rapacious world. And it is enough."

Gunnar pointed out his error. "Grim Hagen, I could kill you in a wink and I want nothing that you have."

"Then you would be a fool," Grim Hagen snorted. "For to the victor belongs the spoils—"

"Nonsense," Maya said, stamping her foot. "You are offending our hosts."

Grim Hagen bowed. "Forgive me, my princess. I meant no offense. But the affairs of the world go ill—and I, for one, would prepare myself for the worst—"

The air near the towering gates was damp. And a dampness had fallen over the little party at the clashing of ideas.

"All the treasures are here, Grim Hagen," Wolden said stiffly. "Do you wish to take inventory?"

Grim Hagen sneered. "With so much, a guard could pilfer a

thousand treasures and never be caught—"

Ato clutched at his sword. "The man from the upper world may be wrong. I may have to kill you myself, Grim Hagen."

Grim Hagen laughed. "Already, three have promised to kill me. Am I that valuable? Never mind, I am satisfied that the Scientists and Philosophers have kept the pledge. They have been too busy chasing moonbeams to take anything. Let us get out of here, for the air is damp."

And so they returned to Orthe-Gard, and found the little sun still shining in the roof above them. But for the rest of the day Gunnar was sharpening a pair of swords—one for Jack Odin, and the long broadsword for himself.

"I am not a philosopher," he said. "But the time comes when swinging steel must clash into the scales. There, my lovely," he said and held his broadsword straight out before him. "The song of the flame was frozen into your sharp steel. And only blood can release the song. For time runs out and the singer sings no more. Oh, Jack Odin, if Gunnar should go out into the dark night, think well of him, as one who loved you for the short time he knew you. And remember Gunnar, who backed down to no man."

Later, White Owl joined them. The little man was glum. "I had a dream," he told

them. "The strangest dream. There was death all about me and I too was dead. And the valkyries were choosing us. The most beautiful one took White Owl. Oh, Gunnar, the threads are torn from the skein. And time has run out for us. If you live, remember the little man who stood beside you in the fighting. For my people are all dead. And I am like a wheel whose felloes are broken. The nave with its shattered spokes has rolled aside. Remember me, Gunnar, and you too, Jack Odin, for I leave no kith or kin behind me. And I dreamed that there was fighting such as we had never seen—"

"You have been drinking, little man," Gunnar assured him.

But White Owl was moody. "The wine of violence is in the air. And the honey-mead of an ancient hate and hunger still makes a man yearn to stand shoulder to shoulder with the gods. These have been my drink this day, Gunnar. The skivers of the gods are growing thin, Gunnar. They may shape a lovely gem, but White Owl will be lost among the shavings."

CHAPTER 9

THAT night the High Council of the world of Opal met for the last time. Guards, soldiers, and advisers were all about. But, strictly speaking, the five holders of the ivory and ruby keys were there to decide.

Jack Odin had to admit that

Grim Hagen dominated the meeting. Whether anyone liked the man or not, he was a forceful speaker. His hate and his distrust for the world above had grown into a passion. He had become a zealot of destruction—and zealots, right or wrong, are always hard to shout down in the councils of the world. They see no middle-ground. To them, there are no shadings to any idea. They are simply one hundred per cent right; those who oppose them are one hundred per cent wrong. The Council was meeting in one of the lesser halls of the Treasure House. It could easily have held a thousand, but not over two hundred spectators had arrived. Many of these were already applauding Grim Hagen.

Odin wondered about that. Had the man a following in Orthe-Gard? Were these some of his own men that he had sent on ahead? Or was Orthe-Gard so lost with its scientific and metaphysical problems that it could not see the danger that threatened them?

Grim Hagen was concluding his speech: "—and are we to take our tributes of bread and salt to a world we never made? It is they who are destroying us. We have done them no harm, other than to take and preserve a few priceless treasures which were being thrown upon their junk-piles. They are many, but they are weak and divided. Within a month we could destroy their armies and fleets. Within two months we could enslave

them, and put them to useful chores which they have shirked these many years."

There was scattered applause, but Jul rose swiftly to his feet in protest. "There has not been any slavery here. It was forbidden in the beginning."

Grim Hagen answered soothingly. "It would not be slavery as they have known it. Their slavery was brutal and destructive. This would be the discipline of the school yard. They must learn the lessons they have refused to study. They will never learn, unless they are forced to do so. Unless they have what they call a Big Brother to keep them at their studies! Under such conditions the Scientists and Philosophers could perfect their theories and inventions. I am impressed with Wolden's work upon the Time-Scheme. The suns are far away. Unless time can be folded up like a fan, these worlds will remain a life-span away. Meanwhile, with men cured of their idiocies and their limitations, their fighting and their absolute refusal to think, we could have the planets colonized within a score of years. Look! There is a rock upon the dead moon that can give forth water and oxygen in abundance. Jupiter has a moon not greatly different from this world. Warmth can be given that moon. Why our ancestors chose to hide down here in a dangerous cellar, I do not know."

Maya arose now, her eyes

flashing. "And who are you to criticize what they did? You—you little man who puts himself higher than the thought-out decisions of the past—? Let Jul speak."

But Jul answered: "On that matter I do not care to speak—not yet."

Grim Hagen's smile was a jeer. "He cannot speak. He knows I am right. We have lived here too long. The walls of this inner world press in upon us. The people of the upper world annoy us daily with their atom blasts. One short war and they will have set off enough of those blasts to finish the destruction of our sun. Then you will grope around here for a few days. You will become pallid, creeping things. And you will die with your useless treasures and all your learning about you. I ask you, is that a pleasant future for a race whose ancestors dared the gulf between the suns? Or is it good for the Neeblings whose fathers dared the deep caves and the things of the caves to find this world?"

"Do not worry about us Neeblings," Jul answered. "We dared the caves and the labyrinths before. We can do so again."

"I move that we vote." Grim Hagen screamed his rage and frustration. "Destruction for the upper world."

There was scattered applause. Far too much applause from such a small crowd, Odin thought.

But Wolden silenced the spectators with a wave of his hand as he got to his feet. "This plan is criminal and it is insane. It is not practical, for there would always be some remnant of men who would hide out and get you, one by one. There is something in the hearts of men that revolts against slavery—even a genteel, well-ordered slavery such as Grim Hagen proposes. You have under-estimated those men up there. I can think of nothing that would unite a disordered world better than our attack. No, it is foolish. I will admit that you led a party up there, Grim Hagen, but you skulked about like a lost dog in the moonlight—"

"We did not skulk." Grim Hagen screamed.

"You were skulking when I first saw you," Jack Odin retorted.

Grim Hagen, sword in hand, was halfway around the council table when Ato and two other soldiers stepped between him and Odin.

"There will be no fighting here, Grim Hagen," Wolden warned. "Sit down—" Grim Hagen sheathed his sword, bowed politely, and obeyed.

"Now," Wolden continued. "I have a plan. The people up there are adherents to formalities. I suppose all the races of men are, lest they go back to the jungle. Some of their formalities appear foolish, but let us humor them. We have our receivers which daily pick up their messages. If

the Council authorizes, we can build a good transmitter in less than twenty-four hours. Then we can talk with them and arrange for a meeting. Our delegates would go forth in their best trappings, honoring all the formalities and fol-de-rol of statecraft as those up there know it. There are reasonable men in that world, just as there are reasonable men here. And neither group has a monopoly upon fools."

"No—" Grim Hagen protested.

"I move that we vote upon the two proposals," Jul thundered.

"Good. Those in favor of Grim Hagen's proposal—"

"Aye," cried Grim Hagen, and scores in the audience shouted their approval.

"One vote." Wolden announced. "Those who are in favor of my proposal—"

He added his own "aye" to the other three votes.

"Then it is decreed," Wolden announced solemnly. "Now, I move that we adjourn, for there is much work to do—"

But Grim Hagen was on his feet for his final speech. "This was no vote. You four had decided such before you came here. Well, it is not enough. I will take my fight to the lesser councils and to the clans and the people. This is an outrage thrown upon all the outrages of the past. They are heaped about you like scrap-piles. Those ash-heaps of honor and dust-bins of

timidity will put forth such clumps of nettles that they will choke you and the world. Time is a tired old man, and he has grown weary of you. Grim Hagen's day dawns, and tonight you have pulled your gravecloths about you. Oh," he sputtered in wrath. "When I am done, you will remember Grim Hagen. The Old Worm gnaws at the bases of your towers, and the pinnacles topple and fall. There comes a new day to be baptized in blood, and that day is Grim Hagen's."

Without another word he stormed out of the meeting place. His lieutenant and a few others followed.

CHAPTER 10

JACK ODIN awoke with the distant blare of loud-speakers troubling his ears. There was a hurried knock at his door and Gunnar came in, buckling on his harness and his long sword as he came.

"Hear that," Gunnar exclaimed. Going to the window he flung it open. "There. Listen."

At first, Odin thought he was re-living the last minutes of that tempestuous scene with Grim Hagen of the night before. Grim Hagen's voice was everywhere. During the night, hundreds of loud-speakers had been installed throughout Orthe-Gard. The voice of Grim Hagen screamed and threatened:

"Surrender now, all of you. My ships are landing. Maya and

the Chief Scientist are my prisoners. My men have taken the Treasure House. Surrender. All of you. There is no other chance. Surrender now, or face death from me or the world above. Grim Hagen is that which stands between you and death. Surrender now, accept me as the ruler of Opal, and we will plan our attack upon the outer world. I tell you, it can be ours. And if you do not accept me, we will take you as our prisoners and leave in the spaceship. We will depart, flooding Opal when we go. You have no other choice. This message is addressed to the Brons. As for the dwarfs, they must be destroyed—regardless. Our ancestors made a terrible mistake. No two races can live together. We have harbored these snakes long enough. Kill the dwarfs and bring me the bread and salt of surrender. You have no other choice!"

Ato and White Owl came rushing into the room. "Your princess and my father are gone." Ato was breathless. "Father was right. We should have had nothing to do with the other cities. Trouble is all they have brought us. Oh, why didn't I kill that Grim Hagen? I wanted to—but I held back— And now my father is gone. Maya is gone and the keys are gone—"

"The key!" Odin, despite Gunnar's many warnings, had put his cumbersome key on a little dressing table the night before. It was gone.

"Where is Jul?" he asked—

fear and rage beating at his throat.

"Not to be found," Ato answered. "There is a trace of a hypnotic gas in the house. Someone must have pumped it into the air conditioners. Why they didn't kill all of us, I do not know—unless they were hurried for time—or the warriors lost their nerve."

A quick search of the house of Wolden gave no trace of Jul, the Ancient of the Neeblings. But in the back yard, within a clump of torn and trampled hydrangeas they found his body. He had fallen over a slain Bron, and his knife was still biting into the dead man's ribs. As old as he was, Jul had accounted for himself well. It may have been that his attack upon Grim Hagen's soldiers—for they found many other tracks in the yard—had saved the lives of the few who remained in the house.

"It is the end of my dream," said White Owl. "Now, let us go forth and kill, and kill, and kill."

But Ato motioned him to silence as he turned a dial beneath a dark picture frame upon the wall. The picture came on, and they could see the docks with dozens of Grim Hagen's ships moored there, and others still arriving pouring their troops and weapons of war upon the city.

Odin was remembering: "That fleet. I did see it out there in the low cloud-banks that evening. Well, we must fight now.

White Owl, you and Gunnar stay here, while Ato and I go out—"

"What?" Gunnar asked, horrified.

"Those loud-speakers are dripping with hatred for the Neeblings. I have known such tactics before. Within a few hours, many will be convinced that the Neeblings are the cause of all their troubles."

Gunnar tightened his wide belt another notch. "Then we will go out there and see what we can do to end that trouble. Jul is dead and Maya is gone. Grim Hagen will swilk in Bron's blood before Gunnar is done."

"I saw this in my dream," White Owl was saying, looking intently at the wall as though still half-asleep. "I saw in my dream that the valkyries were coming for White Owl, but they would not want him if he did not have his dead around him. Well, it has been a good life, and I am well content. In time, I have had many jobs to do. But now there is only one task left before me: to kill. That makes things much easier. For White Owl is a simple man, wearied of too many ideas. The one remaining thought appeals to me. Gunnar, let us go, for Jack Odin and Ato here still have many thoughts—while I have but one remaining."

"No," said Ato, "we go together. We four. My father is out there somewhere. I am younger than the rest of you, but I too can kill."

"And Maya is out there too," Jack Odin replied. "What Grim Hagen has brought to the forge I will beat out, and the sparks of death will fly. I have tried to be a peaceful man, but neither world would let me. Now, if it is death they want, that is what I will give them."

So, leaving the house and the grounds empty behind them, they went out into Grim Hagen's day of blood.

The sound of the loud-speakers grew louder. And over that insane bragging—over, and over, and over, as though Grim Hagen had made a recording—was the sound of fighting.

They had not gone ten blocks before a dozen men rushed at them. They had been looting, for gold chains and jewelled charms were about their necks and arms.

At sight of the dwarfs they rushed forward. But four withdrew sheepishly when they saw Ato. The other eight came on, and Gunnar met the foremost with a sweeping blow that nearly decapitated him. The man fell, spouting blood. The remaining seven turned to flee. But White Owl cast his leather lariat and drew one back. Before the man could get his balance White Owl had cut his throat.

"The first for the Sky-Maidens," he whooped. "Gunnar, stand beside me and we will take this city for our own."

"If there is but one dry stone left, I will stand beside you,

little man," Gunnar encouraged. "On. And on. Ah, this blade is thirsty, and I have been too patient. The old wrongs are no longer sleeping. My blood is boiling. Come, Ato and Odin, let us turn these streets into a shambles."

They went on, killing as they went. But, upon seeing Ato, many of the men of Orthe-Gard joined him. Within an hour they had a following of several hundred men behind them. The Neeblings were jubilant now, eager to kill any they met—and even a bit disappointed when some joined them.

The party neared the docks, and there they found that Orthe-Gard still possessed an army. There was heavy fighting going on, but the soldiers were pressing the invaders back to the sea walls.

Seeing that they were not needed, Ato veered them aside and they went back through the bloody streets toward the Treasure House. The loud-speakers were still blaring, though they destroyed a few as they went along.

By four o'clock, with at least five hundred men behind them, they neared the front of that massive building. The doors were closed. The windows were barricaded. An ominous quiet hung over it, whereas before there had been a hum of peaceful activity about this pile of silver and gold and marble. Odin remembered the students and scientists coming and going,

discussing the books and the thoughts that were housed there.

"I have always been taught that it was impregnable," Ato told Odin and Gunnar as they watched from a distance. "But my father and your princess are there. Also, this Grim Hagen, the cause of all our troubles. I see nothing left except to make a direct assault."

They discussed their chances for a few minutes. But since no other choice remained, they improvised huge battering rams and the five hundred charged for the doors.

Those doors opened. The barricades behind the windows were drawn clear.

Within five minutes time a fiery hell of destruction fell upon the attackers. A needle-nosed machine behind the doors lanced long flames at them. Something sputtered at a window and spat forth blobs of acid that melted flesh and bone. Incendiaries, bombs, machine guns, cannons poured death upon the troops. A score of crab-like metal machines dashed out of the Treasure House and whacked and snipped until countless sword-strikes broke or overturned them.

Five minutes was all it lasted. No charge could have withstood that defense. They fell back with half their number gone—and of that number many were so maimed and wounded that not one out of ten could ever fight again.

A pocket radio told Ato that

the troops at the docks were holding their own. And with that news—the only encouraging news of the day—they crouched within some shattered buildings near the Treasure House and waited until night fell and a ghostly man-made moon was riding in the sky.

CHAPTER 11

ATO had done all he could. "Like children attacking a hornet's nest." He shook his head wearily. "We underestimated this Grim Hagen. Those machines were not ready for battle. He must have planned this affair for months."

"Never mind," Jack Odin assured him. "In time, I will get Grim Hagen. Even if he wins this whole world I'll get him."

Off to one side, Gunnar and White Owl had been carrying on a low conversation.

Now Gunnar came forward with a proposal.

"In the old days," he told them, "my people could enter that tower as they pleased. The upper levels were theirs. Up there are many entrances. The balconies—"

"It is over five hundred feet before there is a ledge," Ato objected. "I know how you feel, friend Gunnar. I have never liked the idea. I like it less now. The helicopters belonged to the Neeblings. It is a shame that they were taken away from you—"

Even with despair and worry

gnawing at his shoulders, Jack Odin found himself thinking: "So their tales of equality and living peacefully together were all lies. Something was wrong, I knew it from the start. They were equal as long as the Neeblings knuckled down to them."

As though sensing his thoughts, White Owl broke in: "Well, the helicopters are not here. But we have the thons and we can make grappling hooks. That wall is not altogether smooth. Helping each other along, twelve stout men could climb it." He looked at Odin thoughtfully. "You are strong enough, but you are heavier than the rest. I don't know—"

Odin's eyes blazed his answer. "If that wall can be climbed, I can climb it. I would hang up there by my eyelashes for a chance at Grim Hagen—"

Ato had lost his weariness. "White Owl, Gunnar, you may be right. By the One and Only, I'll chance it. Wait, I can even add to our chances. Why hadn't I thought of it before? I must hurry back to my father's house."

White Owl went with Ato, and in less than an hour they were back with new-forged grappling hooks. Ato also brought a wide belt with him—a belt with huge black studs.

"These have hardly been tried. But I used this once when I ventured far up the cliff-wall. Here," he buckled it about Odin's waist. "It is a part of my father's work on the time-

scheme. A by-product, you might say. But it is good for only a second. It takes a huge surge of power. And it has not been perfected. But for a second—when this stud is pressed—the wearer is weightless. Time stops for him, and of course gravitation stops."

Gunnar was in a hurry to get started. "This is no time for discussions," he growled. "If it will work, that is the thing. We Neeblings do not need such an invention. I suggest that sixteen of the best of us try the wall. That is all the grappling hooks you beat out, little man,"—this was said to White Owl—"Did you like the number? Or did you get tired?"

"I do not get tired." White Owl shook his fist under Gunnar's nose. "Time was running out—"

There was some talk of scaling the cliff behind the Tower, but that had been smoothed and covered with glassite centuries before. So, after a few last-minute instructions from Gunnar, the party crawled through the shadows to the front of the Treasure House. Sixteen of them—five dwarfs, ten Brons, and Odin—All of them carried lariats.

Half an hour later, the men were clinging to the walls like flies. Below them, a hundred feet down and shining with a ghostly light, were the sidewalks of the Tower. Odin gritted his teeth. His arms and shoulders ached.

His fingers were torn. If it had not been for Gunnar they would never have got ten feet off the ground. He had gone up first, hanging on to the gold and silver work. He had gouged out places for a foothold. Searched for knobs and angles of metal work to serve as anchors for the thons. In one respect, Odin thought, they were lucky that the carvings and bas-reliefs were of gold and silver. But these metals were too soft for safety, and he would have preferred granite or steel.

But they went up. How, Jack never knew. Gunnar and White Owl practically lifted themselves by the seats of their britches. Once he heard a sharp gasp from up above. A whisper of warning, and one of Ato's men hurtled downward. Odin gritted his teeth when he heard the man hit the walk below. The Bron had not cried out. They waited to see if any of Grim Hagen's men had heard. Then, once more, they began inching upward.

At last they halted over five-hundred feet above the walks. Below them, the broken bodies of four Brons were sprawled out upon those walks. Twisted shadows, with bloodstains creeping away from them. Not one had cried out. This night, Odin's patience with the Brons had worn thin, but Lord, they had courage. Too much pride perhaps, but they matched it with courage.

The twelve were now halted while Gunnar felt his way along

up there above them in the shadows.

He groaned and called down to them. "I have one foothold. And I can find no more. For twenty feet up the wall is as smooth as ice; and that ledge up above is too rounded to hold my grapple."

"Think of something," a Bron whispered. "My hands will obey me no longer."

"O Thor and Woden," White Owl exclaimed. "To let us go this far and no farther—"

"Wait," Odin called up into the darkness. "Do you have enough of a stance to lower your lariat?"

"I am only holding by one hand. I can lower the thon. But I couldn't lift you, Jack Odin—"

"You won't have to lift me. I'll try the belt that Wolden made."

Ato groaned. "It doesn't always work."

The lariat came coiling down. Odin knotted it beneath his arms. "Now," he told Gunnar. "When I count three, give a quick yank. Remember—not until I count three—"

"Count, man, count! My arms are not steel—"

And Odin counted: "One—two—three—"

At the count of three he turned the black knob at his belt and pushed himself away from the wall.

There was a sickening feeling of weightlessness. The moon and the stars became streamers

of light as he swung through the air. His body described a semi-circle as he sailed out and up. He struck the parapet high above Gunnar's head just as the surge of power left the belt and weight returned. He lay there for a split second, trying to get his breath, every nerve aching from that quick plunge through a timeless, weightless gulf.

Then he looked about and his spirits soared. Gunnar had flung him to the first rooftop as though he had been a trout.

"Send the men up one by one," Odin called softly. "I'm safe."

One by one Odin pulled them in. And last came Gunnar, his forearms so knotted that the muscles seemed to have been carved there.

From that vantage-point, the Tower began to taper. There were so many carvings that the remaining climb was child's play compared to the sheer wall that they had mastered.

Another hundred feet and they pulled themselves onto one of those elaborate balconies. It must have cost a fortune, but that was not their concern. White Owl and Gunnar found a pair of metal doors. There was a wail of complaint as the doors swung inward. They tumbled into a dark room. Gunnar found a switch and turned on a blazing light.

"See, friend Odin," he called out cheerily. "The upper levels of the Treasure House belonged

to the Neeblings in the old days. We have not forgotten—"

They were in a corridor that was carpeted in a purple velvet pile which must have been fully two inches thick. Gunnar and White Owl led the group until they came to a golden door. Feeling over it, the two dwarfs found a spring. The door opened. Again, Gunnar found a switch and flooded the room before them with light. It was a throne-room. Seated upon a peacock throne was the mummified body of a dwarf-king. A golden mask covered the dead man's face.

"This is the throne-room of Baldar—" Gunnar told them. "Look about you, now. Can you read the golden runes upon the four walls?"

They could not, and the Brons began to fidget. Even Ato was embarrassed. "Then I will read some of the writing," Gunnar exclaimed. "We have been too long silent. The throne-room of Baldar has been sealed too long. Listen—" And he began to read:

"Now, the ship of the Brons arrived upon earth. And the Brons were spent. Also, these were the descendants of soldiers and they knew nothing of the power which had sped their ship through the gulf of space. They were helpless. Then they found the Neeblings who were rulers of the earth in those days—the Little People Under the Hills which every race knows, or remembers in their legends. We

were of the strain of the Norsemen. The Neeblings were masters of the forge and they lived in caves. Now, lest the Brons be killed by savages, the Neeblings took them in. They studied the ship, and they learned its secrets for they were masters of metalwork. And in time they moved to the caverns below the earth and built them a sun of the ancient magic which they discovered in the ship. And they built them a land, the Brons and the Neeblings. The Neeblings ferreted the old learnings from the ship that the Brons brought with them—for the Brons knew nothing of the power that drove them. And they pledged themselves to share and share alike in the world that they made. They built them a Treasure House and the massive gates that opened upon the floor of the sea. And they stored the ship and other treasures there. This is the story of Baldar, King of the Neeblings and one of the Council. Listen to Baldar's story, for the pledge has been sealed with blood and fire—and the Brons and the Neeblings shall be brothers forever, or the land will be cursed—"

Gunnar's voice ended in a roar of triumph. "We have been patient too long. The Brons have been too arrogant. One by one, the equal rights have disappeared. And now, tonight, the inequalities will end—for I am Gunnar, and I am next in line to Jul, who was killed. And I decree that the inequalities be-

gun so long ago will end tonight—and the Neeblings will be done with the Brons forever—"

Ato took his hand. "You are right, Gunnar. But too many rooms up here have been sealed away and lost. They should have been opened long ago. Even so, none of us helped to shape that injustice. Bear with us a while. I will show you that we can fight by your side, even as we fought in the old days—"

"With you, Ato, we have no quarrel. And I am pledged to fight for Maya, if she is still alive. But the Brons must lose their arrogance—or Opal will be carmined with their blood."

"Let us not fight with each other," Odin urged. "I stand up against all that Grim Hagen represents, Gunnar, but I am not yet convinced that Grim represents all of the Brons."

"And will you stand here quarreling like old women?" White Owl asked. "We came here to fight. Let us find our way to the lower levels and get this over. My sword is still thirsty—"

"We will, little man. We will," Gunnar insisted. "But here is a lesson for all of us to learn. There is much more writing upon the walls. The Brons even forgot their own language and adopted the words of the Neeblings. And then, in their arrogance, they cast the Neeblings aside. And we of the Neeblings let matters pass, for we were pledged by blood and fire. And if

our brothers had forgotten, we had not—”

“Will you talk forever!” White Owl exclaimed. “Some day we can tell the old tales by moonlight. But this is a night for fighting—”

“Well, and good, little man.” Gunnar shrugged his huge shoulders. “If it’s fighting you want—”

And he led them from Bal-dar’s Throne-Room into a hall, and finally they found a stairway and marched quietly down to the lower levels.

CHAPTER 12

GUNNAR left them in the darkness of the second floor and stole down the stairs for a look at things. Minutes later he came back.

“Grim Hagen and his captains are in the Hall of Triumph,” he told them, in rare good humor. “My people built that hall. I wonder if Grim Hagen knows about the doors. They have Maya, Wolden, and at least twenty others captive. A score of soldiers are with them. But most of Hagen’s men are near the front of the Tower, awaiting another attack.”

“And is that all?” White Owl asked scornfully. “Why, we have been expecting a battle. One side, now, while I go down and exterminate them.”

Gunnar stopped him. “Wait, you bloodthirsty little man. There are but twelve of us. If we can surprise them, I think

Wolden and his men will help—even with their bare hands. But let me tell you about that hall. There are two doors that recede into the wall when they are open. It takes two strong men to open and close them. But just inside the hall there is a statue of a charging saber-tooth. Hidden in the saber-tooth’s belly there is a switch that closes and locks those doors. The Hall of Triumph was both a banquet hall and a council chamber in the old days. Grim Hagen and his men are about the banquet table now, listening to words of victory from their captains in Valla and Orthe-Gard. The prisoners are seated below them, guarded by the soldiers. There are four soldiers at the doorway. Also, the doorway is within the view of the man who guards the front of the building. Now, we must swarm down there. The four soldiers must go first. Then, we must go inside. Hold anyone away from me while I get to that saber-tooth statue. Once I find that switch, then Grim Hagen could have a million men outside and it would not matter. We will have only him and his men inside to deal with. Do you understand?”

They checked the plans once more. And then they went down the last stairs, their swords ready.

At the foot of the stairway, Gunnar screamed out the old berserker war-cry. They made a rush for four soldiers at the open door. From the front of the

building the guards came on the double to stop them.

The four guards who were nearest braced themselves for the attack. A dwarf cast a lariat and drew one toward him. A Bron threw a knife into the throat of another guard. The other two fell back before the rush of the invading twelve.

They were inside the hall now. Soldiers from the front of the Tower were hastening toward them. The two remaining guards went down. Odin and his men turned to stop the onrushing soldiers. Gunnar fell upon his knees beside the gold statue of the saber-tooth, feeling across its middle.

At least a hundred men were at the doorway now. Spears and swords flashed. Odin swung a chair with all his might and it cleared a swathe through the crowd.

Then Gunnar found the switch, and noiselessly the doors closed. One man came through just before they snapped shut. White Owl nearly decapitated him.

Now the soldiers within the hall were advancing. Wolden and the other prisoners flung themselves upon them. Jack Odin caught a glimpse of Maya as Grim Hagen cuffed her to her knees. Then Hagen and his captains came to meet them.

White Owl and Gunnar were screaming the weirdest war-cries Odin had ever heard. Grim Hagen and his captains answered. The first wave of Grim Hagen's

men was upon them now, and Gunnar swung his broadsword. They went down like wheat. Wolden and his men had grabbed up chairs and anything they could find. There was a bedlam of screams and howls. White Owl was fighting like a wolverine. Small as he was, he was so quick and strong that he had slit the throats of two soldiers before Grim Hagen's men closed about him.

And after that, there was no single event to be remembered. Cries, flashing blades, the smell of fresh blood, these things Jack Odin would recall for the rest of his life. But of the passing of time and the sequence of events, he could remember nothing. The dead and dying slid to the floor. Men cursed, screamed, and prayed. A fallen man slashed at Odin's ankle. And Odin ducked just in time to stop the blade with his own. Then he split the man's skull with one swing of his blade. Over all was the piercing thunder of Gunnar's battle-cries.

Gray-haired Wolden was swinging the broken half of a chair while one of Grim Hagen's men was thrusting at him with a razor-sharp blade. Ato was struggling forward, coming to his father's assistance. Then the soldier went down. And there was Maya, her black hair falling about her shoulders, her eyes blazing. She had buried a knife in the man's ribs. And when he fell at her feet she wiped her

forehead with her hand and began to cry.

Behind them, the soldiers were swinging a battering ram against the closed doors. They might as well have used a feather-duster.

And then, at last, it was over. None of Grim Hagen's men was left standing.

And Maya was in Odin's arms, her warm lips against his, her body pressed close.

Gunnar cried out to Odin. He had found White Owl beneath two of Hagen's soldiers.

"Stay here, dearest," Odin said to Maya. "Wait for me—" "Always," she answered.

They rescued White Owl from the two bodies that were crushing him. The little man had three holes in his chest, and blood was dripping from the corner of his mouth. He grinned when he saw Gunnar. "It was a good fight, eh? A good fight. Hold tight to my arm, Gunnar. I go past the lock of the knitted gates."

And White Owl died.

Tears were streaming from Gunnar's eyes as he straightened the body of his friend. Then he got to his feet.

"Now, where is Grim Hagen? I wish to kill him slowly. Very slowly."

But Grim Hagen was not to be found. They did find an air vent whose steel grill had been slashed open. Evidently, Grim Hagen had slid through the ventilator like a snake when he saw that his battle was lost.

The soldiers who had been battering at the door soon gave up the fight. With no further word from their master they drifted away from the Tower to loot and pillage until finally the re-grouped citizens of Orthe-Gard hunted them down.

But Grim Hagen had vanished into the night.

CHAPTER 13

BY THE time the little sun flamed up into light for the new day, the radio reports were turning in Maya's favor. The fighting at Valla had been bloody, and at first her followers had seemed lost. Those who were in favor of the old regime had been driven into the forests. But there they had been joined by dwarfs from the meadow-lands. Furthermore, the seamen had stayed loyal to Maya. The only navy that Grim Hagen had mustered was in Orthe-Gard. Now, Maya's sailors held the new-built docks and piers.

Maya's friends renewed their assault. Grim Hagen's troops were in the plight of an army which has used its utmost strength for the first attack. With the onslaught of Maya's troops—steadily enforced by sailors, hunters and ranchers—the resistance of Grim Hagen's men grew weaker and weaker. Toward morning their situation seemed hopeless. They fired the piers once more and made a last stand against the sea. Most of them died there.

Meanwhile, in Orthe-Gard, things went slower but victory loomed closer as the hours passed. Grim Hagen had sunk every ship that might stand in his way. His own navy rained a steady stream of explosives and fire-balls upon the town. Wolden and the Scientists managed to repair some huge guns and lugged them to the upper levels of the Treasure House. As soon as morning came, they began to fire—slowly and awkwardly but improving with each shot—until they saw Grim Hagen's flagship go up in smoke. One by one, Grim Hagen's navy was blown apart. The last few ships crept away at their usual slow pace, such an easy target that only six managed to reach the safety of a cloud-bank.

The Philosophers had few reinforcements from the rest of their peninsula. There were only a few dwarfs and hunters within the vicinity. However, as the morning passed, the invaders fell one by one. And by twelve o'clock there was only scattered fighting in Orthe-Gard, where looters had holed up in captured houses. Ato and his troops managed to surround each area and dispose of Grim Hagen's men. It was a slow business, but it was sure.

Toward nightfall—or as the people of Opal called it, "Moon-break"—there was no resistance left in the city.

Grim Hagen's conspiracy had failed. But no one had seen Grim Hagen, alive or dead.

During the days that followed, Maya and Odin were in constant touch with Valla. But, meanwhile, there was a great deal of work to be done in Valla. The treasures from the lower levels of the Tower had been pilfered and strewn all the way from there to the docks. Some were never found, but many were restored.

There were hundreds of dead to be buried. Orthe-Gard had suffered heavy losses that night. There were houses and towers to be repaired. And, even more important, the shattered navy had to be brought up from the sea and rebuilt.

"It is a good sound," Gunnar told Maya and Odin, "the sound of the hammer. We thought we had everything done that was needed to be done. But I think when the noise of the hammer dies, a country dies. Or a city. We must not forget this lesson."

Gunnar did consent to attend the council-meetings. But most of his time was spent in preparing two huge caskets from the whitest oak for Jul and White Owl. Their bodies were preserved in salt, and they were to go back to Valla in state. Huge caskets for such small men, Odin thought. But Gunnar worked tirelessly with chisel and mallet. Those caskets were covered with stout Norse runes and pictures of the old Norse Gods. And the valkyries hovered everywhere to attend to the wishes of Jul and White Owl. Barbarous and beau-

tiful, those caskets, fashioned with all the loving care that Gunnar could give them. Rude when compared to the exact art of the Brons, but the strength of Gunnar flowed into his chisel and these caskets would have been museum pieces in the world above.

Maya sent word for her people to dispatch a fleet to Orthe-Gard. Meanwhile, the work went on. Gunnar replaced old Jul in the council. Temporarily, Ato had been chosen by the survivors to replace Grim Hagen.

There was a deal of old laws being changed. Old men, wearing heavy spectacles, searched the leather-bound, deckle-edged volumes of the past. And when they found one line that was restrictive to the Neeblings, that line was erased by a new law.

There came a day when the Council and the lesser authorities of Orthe-Gard made a breath-taking climb to the upper levels of the Treasure House. There, with a solemn assemblage about him, Gunnar read the runes upon the walls of the Throne-Room of Baldar.

Maya was crying when he had finished. "And, Gunnar, you and Jul and White Owl stayed faithful to me—after knowing all this?"

"There was the pledge of blood and fire. And, also, princess, we liked you and your father before you."

She kissed him, and Gunnar flushed crimson. "Eh, I liked that," he said. "But no more of

this. There is work to be done, and what will my wife Freida say when Gunnar returns from his wanderings and tells of being kissed by the most beautiful girl in the land? She will either say that Gunnar is growing old and lying, or she will whack him one." He chuckled. "Anyway, I tell her. Her and the children. It will be a tale for a family to remember, like the story of mine grandfather catching the giant squid—although one jealous old man swore to the last that grandfather found the squid in a bottle."

The helicopters in the Treasure House were given new motors and were turned over to Gunnar for storage and distribution.

At Maya's request other machines were taken aboard the repaired ships. Valla had been too long without them, she said. Now, perhaps, her people had learned their lesson. A race could make a cult of their strength and endurance long enough. Why throw away the things that their ancestors had mastered?

The repair of Orthe-Gard was nearly completed when the ships from Valla hove into sight.

The return to Valla was uneventful. Wolden, Ato, and a few chosen troops went with them. The Council met for an hour each day. Otherwise, there was little to do except stand by the rail and enjoy the sun and watch the creatures of that teeming

sun going about their play and their feeding. The pace of the ships had not been changed, although Odin had learned that this was possible.

"It would be a drain upon the sun," Wolden had advised. "Besides, what would we do with the extra time if we got there in such a hurry?"

The sun was behaving beautifully. For the moment, there seemed to be no worries left in the world of Opal. And with Maya leaning against him at the rail, and the jasmine fragrance of perfumed black curls in the air, Odin agreed that this was no time for hurrying.

After much secret planning and talks of the future—talks which were invariably interrupted by moments which seemed much more important than the future—Jack Odin and Maya brought the matter of their approaching marriage to the Council.

"I have thought of this question," Wolden answered solidly. "For it has been upon your faces since first we met. Still, in view of our plans, I would advise that the marriage be postponed."

"But, no," Maya exclaimed. "For good or ill, the old law forbids anyone tampering with a marriage."

"True," Wolden answered. "We cannot stop you. But we are staking all our hopes on your mission to the upper world. When the time is right, we will contact them. As you now are, you can meet with them as two

representatives of the Council. Married, it might appear to some that you are merely a princess and her consort. Furthermore, if all goes well, the world above will go wild over that approaching marriage. Whatever their faults, they love a lover—"

"He speaks truth, lad," Gunnar advised. "Go up there as a lover. Not as a bridegroom. A flower, a flounder, and a bridegroom—these fade fast enough."

Odin and Maya reluctantly agreed to accept the decision of the Council. Ato hesitated, but voted along with his father and Gunnar.

And so it was agreed—and so it was writ in the journal of the Council—

Then, on a morning when misty rain was falling about them, they sighted the towers of Valla. Rainwashed and free, the city and its beaches, and its emerald forests beyond welcomed their homecoming children.

CHAPTER 14

IT IS A matter of timing," I said Wolden. "Once you have started on your way to the upper world we will contact the authorities. That will be a moment to stand out in history. In all the years, we have never sent a diplomatic party to the lands above. True, we have gone there. But this, as I see it, must be timed perfectly. You must be met by those in authority. If we let the news out too soon, your

arrival will be like a county fair. Every churl for miles around will be there. Some will even be selling hot dogs and peanuts. I have a few recordings of the Floyd Collins incident and the Udall Tornado which would turn your stomach."

He pinched his thin lips in worriment. "It is the most important matter in our history. Our lives may hang in the balance. It is up to us to plan, to think—"

And Maya murmured: "I wonder if they will like my clothes."

Odin started to laugh, but Wolden frowned a warning. "Never laugh at a woman's clothes. Women's clothes have made history—"

"Or Godiva's and Bathsheba's lack of them," Odin retorted. "Honestly, aren't we taking this matter too seriously? Maya and I will have to go up there and do the best we can. Excuse me if I am taking this too lightly, but our trip can't be reduced to a mathematical formula."

Wolden sighed. "But so much depends on the next few days. That world of yours is already overcrowded. And we do have much treasures here. We don't want to end up as the Incas did. Nor do we want to become pawns in international affairs."

"My people are just—" Odin retorted.

But even Gunnar was doubtful. "I was up there, and I had a feeling of gloom about me, as though the Old Worm had final-

ly gnawed through the roots of the tree of Yggdrasil, and the mad squirrel upon its branches was about to run amuck with such mischief that we had never endured before. I have the same feeling now. We are leaving something out of our plans. I wish I felt better about the journey—"

"Nonsense," said Odin. "You crept through alleys like lost dogs when you should have been announcing yourselves at the White House."

"Well, it is all done now," was Gunnar's reply. "And I wish you the best—"

"And we will do our best," Odin promised.

Gunnar looked down at his big hands. "I wish I had got these around Grim Hagen's throat. Then I would feel much better."

Days of preparation went by. Treasures were sorted and stored in the elevator that had brought Odin to the land of Opal. Documents were carefully selected, lest there be any suspicion of fraud. Here was a key to the writings of Crete and there a burned brick that bore Tiglath-Pileser's signature. Photographs, haphazard recordings, pictures of the stars, maps, things from the sea, Spanish coins, and dozens of other treasures. Maya added her wardrobe and the two statuettes. Gunnar tossed in a saber-tooth from a tiger not five days dead and a little package of oat-seeds which were twice as large as any grown in the upper world. "Maybe simple men will

understand these things better than the writings," he explained.

The day for Odin's and Maya's departure from Opal finally arrived. The door to the once-forbidden elevator was open. For once, the people of Valla forgot their inclination to leave the other fellow alone and turned out for a holiday of bunting, bands and flags. The little sun held steady above them. And the breezes from the land where it was always June were cool and fragrant.

Escorted by Wolden, Ato, and Gunnar the two were paraded from the town. Along the shell-paved road. Up the long, wide stairway that was flecked with gold. The throng pressed close behind them, cheering them on.

Now they stood at the door to the shaft.

"It is ready," Wolden explained. "We have installed automatic controls. It is stocked with oxygen and food. The trip upward will be much longer, but you will not have to watch the machines. I checked them yesterday and these guards have not been away from the door. There, now. In you go. The best of luck to you, and the best of luck to your mission—"

He whispered in Odin's ear. "I have just received a report that the sun has lost more of its energy. Hurry, man, lest it start flickering. Some of these people still believe in omens—"

The crowd was cheering and

closing in, almost shoving Wolden and his companions into the elevator along with Odin and Maya.

They stood there for a moment, waving their farewells.

"Now," Odin heard Wolden cry out. "Make ready."

Slowly the door to the elevator began to close. The bands played louder. Odin and Maya waved once more.

And then it happened.

All was confusion on the steps before the elevator shaft. A knife flashed in the sun. Someone screamed. A skilfully thrown lariat settled about Maya's shoulders. Odin clutched at her and missed. And Maya was drawn through the closing door. She cried out once in pain and fear.

Soldiers were ripping at each other with flashing blades. Odin saw Gunnar's broadsword go up and down and heard his shrill—war-cry as he fought his way to Maya's side.

He struggled with the door. It was too narrow now for him to get through. He tried to force it back—struggled with it until it was relentlessly closing upon his fingers.

He lost his grip and fell back. There was a roaring of old, stout machines in his ears. Then slowly the elevator moved upward. It gained speed and the noise of the machines dwined to a faint humming.

He tried to remember the controls that Gunnar and Maya had worked. But they were gone. Wolden, thinking to help, had

ruined him with those automatic controls.

There was a radio within the room. He turned it on, but got only silence. The radio was dead.

Everything had been tampered with. Not half the treasures they had stored remained. Now, to make matters worse, the yellow light above his head began to flicker. Finally it went out, leaving him in pitch darkness. And still the elevator went slowly up. Once it ground to a halt—moved sideways like a crab—and then roared again as it moved aloft.

At long last he found food and water. The thought came to him that perhaps it had been poisoned. But he was feeling so low that he did not care. He ate and drank. Then he sat there in the darkness, promising himself what he would do to Grim Hagen if he ever caught him.

Surely this was Grim Hagen's work. Those soldiers that Wolden had trusted. Grim Hagen's men, doubtless. For if they were not, then Wolden was the traitor—and Wolden had been too worried, too sincere, too friendly to do a thing like this.

Then, sitting there in the darkness, he heard the tick-tick-ticking of a clock. He and Maya carried watches, they did not require a clock.

His last matches went to find the source of that ticking which seemed to be growing louder all the while. They were wasted. There was no clock in sight, though he searched everywhere—

He sat there in the darkness now, and the ticking increased in loudness almost to hammer blows. A time-bomb, he decided. Well, Grim Hagen had been good at planning. What did it matter now—?

But soon it appeared that Grim Hagen had taken no chances. The air was growing heavy. Something had gone wrong with the oxygen controls.

Odin went to his knees. After breathing became uncomfortable there, he lay flat upon his belly. The air was cool and fresh for a few minutes. Then it too became heavy.

The blackness burgeoned into flame. Here was a sun that was flickering out, and here was a world of emerald and turquoise where it was always June. And there, standing like a goddess was a golden girl with golden eyes who held her arms out to him. The sun and the world became one vast jewel of flame. And standing there in the center of the jewel, a tip-toed silhouette reaching out to him, was the golden girl. Then the jewel burst into a million sparks. They sailed through the sky—hurrying to join the drift of suns. Tiny bubbles of light, fleeing away from him, and on each sparkling bubble was a golden girl who held her arms out to him and called farewell.

Then there was nothing but blackness.

When he awoke, good cool air was flowing across his face. The

elevator had stopped. The door had opened. Out there was a glimpse of a blue sky and a few tattered mesquites. The elevator had thrust its way up through rocks and clay and had come to rest.

He listened. A bird was singing—a sad, plaintive song, as though it had lost its mate.

But there was another sound. Nearer. He got to his knees and listened again.

"Tick. Tick. Tick."

And he remembered the sound that had tortured him all the way through the dark trip upward.

Odin got to his feet and leaped through the doorway. He fell over and over as he rolled down the incline of clay and rocks that the elevator had shoved upward. Then he got to his feet and ran a few more steps. Ran until he could go no farther. Lord, he was weak, he thought. And how could a man tear the world apart to find Maya when he was as weak as this?

The fall saved him.

Behind him the elevator, the rocks and the clay melted into one fiery blast.

Stones rained about him. Steel whistled over his head.

He dug into the ground, while the sound of the explosion tore at his ears and the flame scorched the shirt from his back.

Minutes later, when he got to his feet again, there was no sound anywhere. The bird had either been killed or had flown away. His back and arms were

blistered. One shoe-sole flopped as he limped away.

Dazed and hurt, he stumbled along. A walking scare-crow. Now and then he stopped to rest, but he kept getting up and going on. He fell against a mesquite once and it lashed him with its thorns. But he kept going on until he found an old cattle-trail. He went along it until he came to a hard-baked, rutted road. And this he followed until he came to a paved highway which went straight across a land that was made up of little rolling hills. It must be spring-time up here, he thought. For not far away was a field of blue bonnets.

He staggered along the gray highway for a few more minutes. Then he fell again, struggled up only to fall once more.

A passing motorist found him and carried him on to the nearest town.

CHAPTER 15

JACK ODIN knew little of the happenings of the next two weeks. He was a patient in the charity ward of a Texas hospital. They treated him well, these Texans, though the county sheriff asked him countless questions toward the last. The sheriff and even the Ranger who came to see him were convinced, apparently, that he had been tortured by gangsters and thrown out of a car.

He was shown a map of the vicinity where he had been

found, and learned that most of the land in that area consisted of marginal ranches which had been abandoned during the drouth. No one had heard an explosion.

They had been so hospitable to him that he did not know what to say. Finally, in desperation, he told the truth to the sheriff. The next day a doctor from Austin called upon Odin and listened to the tale. The second day he returned—and the third, making notes all the while.

On the fourth day, the doctor tried to talk to him.

"We have sent some telegrams and have made a few long-distance calls. You are Doctor Jack Odin. That much we know. We found a veteran in the next county who remembers you from Korea. You patched him up. Now, it is my theory, doctor, that you simply cracked up as a result of the war and the troubles that you had in Maryland. These stories of the land of Opal. Why, man, people have been looking for a world where it is always June since Eden was lost. And Maya! Even the name is a psychological phenomenon. As for the dwarfish Norsemen and their mythology—why, all mythology is sound. Metaphorically, at least, there has always been a tree of Yggdrasil, with its branches in heaven and its roots in hell. And the worm of death has always gnawed at it. The squirrel of mischief or 'hap-

penstance' has always darted from branch to branch. For the affairs of men are never settled. Now, be reasonable, Doctor Odin, you simply blacked out and went wandering across the country. You fell among thieves. They took your money and identifications and left you for dead on the highway. You were badly burned, as from a blow-torch. Or lighter fluid blazing across your back might have caused those injuries. You don't remember any of them? The sadists! Don't worry, we'll catch them yet."

A Texan to the last, the doctor was certain that no criminal, sane or mad, could escape the Rangers.

In vain, Odin swore that his story was true, and there were no fiends who had tortured and robbed him. There was a certain hell's spawn by the name of Grim Hagen who he intended to find if it took the rest of his days.

But it was no use. They released him when his old attorney from Washington came out to get him. Noland, who had been his father's friend, was a very successful lawyer indeed, but he had not been west of the Potomac in forty years. He had already convinced himself that Jack Odin and all Texans were mad.

So, after writing some substantial checks to the men and the hospital who had saved him, Jack Odin came back to Washington and Baltimore.

The next two weeks were mere repetitions of the last days in the little Texas hospital. Using his father's name, Odin went to some Government officials who refused to believe one word of his story.

At last, Odin wished them a fond good-bye. Then he made arrangements to open up a research office in Washington. He found some rooms above several tiny little stores on K Street. They were not the best, but he was not interested in business or a career. The men he hired were trained in research. Some had degrees in Oceanography and Geophysics. He set them to work in the Smithsonsian and the labyrinths of the Congressional Library.

Each Friday, they went over the week's findings. Things were shaping up. The evidence in his favor was growing.

Given six more months and a staff such as this, he was sure that he could prove his story and the existence of the world of Opal. Fortunately, there was plenty of money to meet expenses.

Then came the news that closed the offices. At first, it was just a tiny squib from the Houston Press which told of a swirling little fountain of steam spouting out of the Gulf some fifty miles to the south of Galveston. Two passing ships had sighted it. The next day there was a report that the geyser of steam had grown larger and the

waters about it appeared to be smoldering.

On the third day the steam was forgotten. The waters of the Gulf had begun to recede, rapidly. A luxury fishing boat came in from the Dry Tortugas with ailing passengers and crew. The ship was radio-active. And far out in the Gulf there was a play of lights as though the aurora of the North had fled southward.

The waters receded more. In the long run, the states along the Gulf-coast benefitted from the events that followed. But for several days the cities and the beaches faced unleashed fury.

The Gulf continued to recede, and then with little warning burst into a Tidal Wave. The main force appeared to be centered upon Galveston. But the city had been caught by disaster before and was prepared. Storms of deadly violence raged all over the Gulf, and up and down the coast. Survivors reported that their ships had simply fallen apart. Miami faced the worst hurricane of its history. As for the planes that were flying those waters that grim, gray morning, not one survived.

It was the morning of October 1st. The Gulf-states were having so much trouble with the storms, and even reporters and photographers along the coast were so busily hunting through the wreckage, that no one knows the truth of the happenings that occurred.

It is certain that the Air Force and the Coast Guard kept

records and made reports accordingly. But those reports have not yet been released.

Out where the little geyser of steam had first appeared, the smoldering sea suddenly turned into flame as though an underwater volcano had just been born. The flame continued, spouting toward the sky in every color of the rainbow.

The flame rose higher. The Tidal Wave was at its worst. And then, quite leisurely, an hour-glass shape shook itself from the waters. It went straight upward. As one man said: "It looked like a little sun with dozens of tiny moons coiling up and down and around. A perfect hour-glass with the sun in the very center—"

Others referred to it as an enormous X, slightly bulged at the intersection of the arms.

Once out of the sea the shape began to pick up speed. And the strangest phenomenon of all was that as it climbed higher into the sky it seemed to grow.

A seaman, who at the time was clinging to a shattered boat with the colored water beating around him, later said: "I was the nearest one to it, I think. When it left the water, it was like being struck by an electric eel. But that wasn't the worst shock. It was the way it grew. Five miles up, it looked much larger than when I first saw it. And as it went up and up it was still growing."

These are the reports of the

first happenings of that gray, stormy morning. Most of them have been howled down, as tales born of terror and superstition during the worst storm of the century.

But they persist.

Meanwhile, the glowing shape went higher, always increasing speed, always growing.

It was miles into the air now and nearly a mile across. Watchers from other states saw it as a soaring rocket—or, as many said, "a flying saucer of blazing force."

Its speed suddenly diminished, although the whirling moons flashed brighter and the central core of the thing was noticeably growing. Almost motionless in the sky it dropped something down. A gleaming yo-yo on a silver string. A golden spider climbing down a glistening thread. These words have been used to describe it. And yet there are some who swear they saw nothing.

The ball at the end of the glistening thread came near the waters. It began to grow. It sucked up a whirling sphere. And, still drawing its stores from the sea and still growing, the craft up there in the ionosphere flashed two dazzling shafts of light down upon the earth. One burst high above Washington. The other high above Moscow. As though it played no favorites. These blazed high above the cities, and they must have been warning blasts, surely. For the thermom-

eters in each city climbed to 110°. The barometers dropped low, as though all pressure were being burned away from the two areas.

Then the whirling sphere of water was drawn upward, freezing as it went. Trailing the globe behind it like a pinnacle, the growing hour-glass of central light and coiling moons darted upward at a pace that defied the astronomers. Still growing, they vanished—or melted into space. Before they faded they filled one-twelfth of the sky. A glowing mist that trailed away, leaving men to squabble over the cause of a storm. Or the phenomenon that a storm can create.

Storms and cyclones followed the two blasts. The seas of the world were troubled.

In time, the Gulf quieted. The Gulf-states—Texas especially—found themselves the happy owners of miles and miles of additional land. Before the mud had dried, oil seepage was glistening in the sun, and drilling crews were moving in.

Back in Washington, when the news had subsided, Doctor Jack Odin and his men made a last desperate attempt to correlate the events of those three days. There was too much confusion. There were too many reports. Some were being studied by the authorities and could not be released at the present time.

Time was growing short. Odin gave each man an extra check and closed his office. Then he de-

posited six thousand dollars to the credit of a Geophysicist who had a talent for questions, and instructed him to devote a year to the events of October 1st.

Just before Odin snapped out the light in his office, at the close of that last wearisome day, he scrawled a few lines as a postscript to the notes he had been preparing:—

*And like a soul belated,
In hell and heaven unmated,
By cloud and mist abated
Comes out of darkness
morn.*

Then, taking his notes with him, he closed his tiny offices on K Street forever.

No one in Washington or Baltimore saw Doctor Jack Odin after that night.

The general belief is that he had another spell of amnesia and went wandering once more.

Some distant cousins are fighting furiously over his estate.

CHAPTER 16

ON THE night when this adventure began, you may remember that Jack Odin was writing a letter to a friend in Kansas.

I am that friend.

He never finished the letter. But several months ago I did hear from him. The postman delivered a sealed bundle of papers to me which had been mailed first-class from Georgetown,

Texas. Aside from the postmark, there was no return address.

I unsealed the package and found page after page of notes, carefully numbered, but in places so terse and so hastily written that the narrative was difficult to follow. Odin is one of those writers who can condense a page into a sentence and a sentence into a comma.

They became more incoherent toward the last, as though the writer was shaken by grief and agitation.

"Dear Joe:" his letter began, "you always liked to monkey around with words. Maybe you can piece these pages together. At any rate they will explain why I haven't written for so long."

The balance of his letter contained so many personal remarks, mingled with his plans and what had happened to him since his disappearance from Washington, that I will not copy it. Instead, I have sifted out the last lines of his narrative—just as I have pieced the preceding chapters together from the notes that he sent me. "For," as he said toward the close of his letter, "time is growing short and the tale is almost ended."

It was the doctor from Austin who brought Jack back to Texas. A kindly man, he had written Jack a long letter and enclosed a clipping from a local paper.

Now, it seems that a certain rancher by the name of Jim

Keefe had been set upon by three murderous little men one moonlit night. Keefe, who lived some twenty miles northeast of Fredericksburg, had been in Austin on business. The business attended to, and being mighty dry, he had spent some time at a local bar. Then, in spite of all the warnings of Safety Commissions and the law, he had purchased a bottle and, putting it on the seat beside him, had steered an unsteady course for home. At last, when he closed his gate behind him and started his pickup over the rutted trail which led to his ranchhouse, he was very unsteady indeed. He stopped the car and took another drink. There was a full moon out that night—or maybe two of them—but Keefe had never been known to see things before.

Keefe sat there for a few minutes with the night wind blowing in his face, and feeling much better, when he saw three figures on the crest of a knoll nearby. They were gaunt and bent. They wore tight fitting, laced jackets, and on their heads each had a peaked cap into which a feather was thrust at a jaunty angle. Each figure carried a bundle over his shoulder. And the largest of the three carried something else. A slaughtered calf. Now, what Texan would stand for that!

Taking a jack-handle from his car, Keefe advanced to meet the three gnarled men. Yelling a battle-cry worthy of San Jacinto

he ran toward them, waving his weapon aloft.

They waited. As he drew nearer Keefe saw that all of them were dwarfish, although the one who carried the calf so easily was larger than the other two. All were dressed in a strange fashion.

"You rustling varmints," Keefe yelled, "I'll clobber you—" And he rushed at them, swinging the jack-handle.

Suddenly the largest of the dwarfs let the calf fall from his shoulders. He was wearing a huge broadsword which was slung across his back. The carcass of the calf had hidden it before. With a battle-cry that nearly froze Keefe's blood, the little man unsheathed the sword and rushed at the rancher. Had Keefe not been a bit unsteady on his feet, the first blow would have decapitated him.

As it was he slipped nearly to his knees and the broadsword whistled over his head.

The two smaller dwarfs were also advancing.

Keefe righted himself and retreated.

The dwarfs did not follow.

The next day Keefe took his story to the local authorities. Some remembered how thirsty a rancher can get when he comes to town. However, there was an investigation. The only proof of Keefe's story was a bloody spot nearby where unmistakably a calf had been slaughtered.

The doctor's point in writing the letter was convincing to any-

one except Odin. The incident proved that thieves were in the vicinity. The thieves were dwarfs and murderous. This, according to the doctor, completed the case of Odin's hiatus. He had picked up the dwarfs somewhere. They had tortured and robbed him, leaving him for dead on the highway. That explained the "dreams" of the little men.

But to Odin it meant that some of the dwarfs had come up from the world of Opal. The largest dwarf with the huge sword. Could that be Gunnar?

All along, his research had pointed more and more to the vicinity of Longhorn Caverns, near Georgetown. He hurried to that city and immediately hired a taxi for side-excursions to the Caverns. He was disappointed. They were closed by a heavy grill. A good-natured, talkative guide took him on a short tour of the labyrinths. That part of it which was electrically lighted. He saw Sam Bass' huge footprint and other formations which might have interested him in other days. But now he was interested in those unexplored pitch-black passages that led away from the tourists' paths. The guide would allow no venturing. Jack Odin went back to Georgetown with the feeling that short of an order from the Governor of Texas he would never explore the Caverns from that entrance.

The next day, he and his taxi-

man started out to find Jim Keefe. It took nearly all day, for Jim's ranch was in a lonely spot off the known roads.

Keefe told him the story, now and then making a few remarks as to the ancestry of the men who had laughed at his tale of the dwarfs.

"But what became of them?" Odin asked cautiously. "Have you any idea?"

"Of course, I have. I told the sheriff. He wouldn't even listen. They're hid out in the Hole."

"The Hole?"

"Sure. A hole about six feet across that goes straight down fer maybe eight feet and then angles off, and then goes on down again. Dark as pitch. I lost a calf there once, and I've kept it fenced off ever since. A spook place. Those varmints have got away. And, somehow, they looked like critters that would be housed up in such a place. Reminded me of a tale that my grandma used to tell—"

Keefe was on the fringe of bankruptcy, and a check immediately convinced him that Jack Odin was an explorer and should

be given permission to investigate the Hole.

Odin went back to Georgetown. He finished his letter and mailed it and the package to me. Then he purchased some food, a high-powered rifle, and some other things. Even the man at the sporting goods store thought that a case of ammunition was a bit too much for a beginner.

Once more the taxi went back to Jim Keefe's place. Odin unloaded his supplies and gave the driver a hundred-dollar-bill. Jim Keefe was not there. When he came back, he wrote me later, "the man was gone."

As far as I know, the taxi-driver was the last person to see Jack Odin. I can imagine Jack lugging his things, including a long coil of rope, to that spooky place which Keefe called "The Hole." The hot Texas day would not have bothered him, for he was a strong man.

This much I can imagine. For the last line added to his letter just before he mailed it that day in Georgetown reads:

"I'm Going Back."

THE END



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